North·West ROMANCES

STORIES OF THE WILDERNESS FRONTIER

SUMMER 20¢

HOSTAGE OF THE MAN-PACK

A COMPLETE NOVEL OF TIMBER TRAILS AND SMOKING GUNS by HARRY F. OLMSTEAD

BEYOND THE BOREALIS

by JOHN STARR

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North West ROMANCES

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Dear Pop:

Even an old Rainbow Divisioner like you would pop your eyes at the army we're putting together this time. Let me tell you, they're doing everything to make up just about the best bunch of fighting galoots you ever saw.

And that goes for what they do for us off duty, too! Take this new clubhouse we got just outside of camp. It's got radios, dance floors, nice soft chairs and everything. And, Pop, you can get something to eat that won't cost you a month's pay!

Now, the army isn't running this. The USO is. And most of the other camps got USO clubs too, because you and a lot of other folks dug down and gave the money to the USO last year.

But, Pop, you know what's happened since then. Guys've been streaming into uniform. Last year there was less than 2 million of us. This year there'll be 4 million. And the USO needs a lot more dough to serve that many men—around 32,000,000 bucks I hear.

Now, Pop, I know you upped with what you could last time. But it would sure be swell if you could dig into the old sock again. Maybe you could get some of the other folks in the neighborhood steamed up, too.

It will mean an awful lot to the fellows in camp all over the country. Sort of show 'em the home-folks are backing them up. And, Pop, an old soldier like you knows that's a mighty nice feeling for a fellow to have. See what you can do, huh, Pop?

Bill

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BEYOND THE BOREALIS

A STIRRING NOVEL OF NORTHLAND RETRIBUTION

by

JOHN STARR

BEYOND THE BOREALIS

By JOHN STARR

Kadak was all killer, the murder-trained whelp of an Arctic sire, and he slew viciously at command. Then came the day when he drove slashing fangs at an unprotected throat—and dog instinct fought brute lust for the life of the man he loved.

JUST south of the Arctic Circle and two hundred miles north of the Great Slave is a large, irregular sheet of water whose armlets, many of which no man has explored, reach into the fissured hills. It is called Lake-of-the-Hills. From it springs the Little Beaver that unites with the far-flung Mackenzie many days'

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Kadak was death incarnate as he sprang.

travel westward. At the confluence of lake and river is the little trading post of Caribou Ford, where is established headquarters of the Dominion Fur Company.

On the Summit, not far above Caribou Ford, a man lay prone on the earth, twisted, beaten, broken. His face, horribly bloody and black, was pressed into the late spring snow as he groveled in abject anger and shame. Intense as was his physical pain, it was as nothing to the racking death-pangs of pride.

Slowly, with excruciating agony, he raised himself to his knees. He held up his broken wrists. He lifted them in blind, insensate rage to the Arctic sky.

A man had done this! It did not help that his antagonist had just, almost righteous, provocation. It did not allay the awful smart that his foe had not come off unscathed; nor that the fight had been fair—that never had two men met in mortal combat where the odds were more equal. These reflections but increased his torment.

"For dis I keel heem—keel heem—keel heem!" grated through lips bruised and

purple. "How—I know not yet, but slow, slow—"

Far down the slope, from the Company's stockade; lifted a mournful long-drawn howl from the throat of "Devil Dog," Kadak.

Was it hell-born inspiration that twisted that bloody mouth into ghastly semblance of a grin?

"*Oui*—I weel keel Jules Francois!" he made relentless oath. "Not wit' ma fists—no! But in a way—terrible. Ah, de Mounted can watch an' nevaire know I. Pierre Croisett, hev done eet!"

II

"TAKE Kadak, now," observed David Lethro, the big-souled Manager of the Dominion Fur Company, six months later; "he's got individuality. Rightly handled he'll be a wonder. Spoiled, he'll be a demon more dangerous than any wolf—for he's lived with man, partook of his superior intelligence, and lost a lot of the fear that mystery gives. There's not one man in a hundred qualified to handle him."

Only one of the group gathered about the Yukon stove in the company store took exception to this remark. That one was Pierre Croisett, the big, French-Canadian hunter who supplied the post with meat.

"Bah!" he ejaculated, an expression of sneering superiority on his bold, handsome face. "Dogs ees dogs. To handle dem ees not'ing. Take me, I am de driver extraordinaire! My rule ees—break hees spirit. Show heem on de spot who ees master. Den he crawl on hees belly an' leek your han'—"

Transfixing them all came a prolonged scream, the blood-curdling cry of a man in mortal terror. On the very echo of that cry the door burst open, admitting a terrorized, blood-stained half-breed, who instantly slammed it shut as if to close out Death itself.

"What is it, Joe?" Lethro demanded sharply.

"He ees devil! He ees twen' t'ousand devil!" Joe, the company dog-tender, panted, sagging weakly against the wall.

They saw that his clothing was torn in shreds. Blood streamed from a dozen terrible slashes on hands and arms. One long cut on his chest was bared where Mackinaw and shirt had been torn away. His swarthy cheek revealed a crimson furrow where a murderous claw had landed. Literally the man was quaking with terror at the thing he had escaped.

"*Sacredam,*" he ees devil!" he moaned in the hysteria of abject fear.

"You jumped in here like the Old Scratch himself was after you," said Lethro, severely, attempting to shake the half-breed out of his trance. "Simmer down and give us the straight of this."

With dilated eyes Joe glanced at the door as if to assure himself that it was securely latched. Then, with many a shrug and gesture, broke into an almost incoherent flow of words.

"By Gar, I t'ink eet ees de feenish! I t'ink dis tam I be angel for sure! He jump—hees mout' wide—almos' I see hees stomach! Alway' I say he hev devil—he hev wan t'ousand dev—"

"Hang onto yourself, Joe! What dog attacked you?"

The half-breed almost danced in his agitation.

"*Sacredam,* hev I not explain'? Eet ees de devil dog. Me—I go to de stockade wit' feesh for mak' de feed. Firs' I t'row to Kadak. One gulp, he eat eet. I feed de odders. All tam Kadak heem growl lak hell. I lak not de red in hees eye. I—"

"Joe, was it Kadak?"

"*Certainment!* Hev I not mak' dat clear? I am leeve de stockade. I drop wan feesh. Kadak mak' de grab. I stoop—to peek eet up. I hev eet mos' recover. Bing! he jump on me, lak dat! Wit' ma wheep I heet heem. He hev small fear. All tam he mad lak hell. All tam dat growl in hees t'roat. Pouf! He tear ma shirt. He bite me here, an' here, an' here! Almos' he keel me ontire. Me? I fight lak hell. I break hees hol'. I am arrive here. By Gar, I hev de luck! Wot?"

Having brought his dramatic recital to a close, Joe added confidently, "Now you keel heem, Lethro."

David Lethro's pleasant features were very grave. It was evident the half-breed had escaped a horrible death by the thinnest of margins. A man-killing dog—unless the animal has just provocation—is not tolerated in the North. Joe was within his rights in demanding the Malemute's death.

Yet the manager was singularly loath to kill Kadak.

In the first instance, the dog was valuable. Unbroken, as yet, but nevertheless the most promising dog in his possession. The very spirit and determination he displayed would only enhance his value once they were diverted into proper channels. But what decided Lethro against taking any stringent action at the time, was the suspicion that the animal had some just motive for the attack.

He was certain that could he but train Kadak, giving him the patient, painstaking treatment his particular disposition demanded, he could evolve a leader that would eclipse any to be found around Lake-of-the-Hills. But he was a busy man—

"Now you keel heem?" Joe iterated impatiently. Like all present, he was amazed that the manager could hesitate in so clear a case.

"No-o," came the slow negation. "Not yet, anyhow. Somehow I can't believe Kadak's gone completely outlaw."

Mell Young, the huge, blond freighter, smiled.

"One squint at Joe ought to convince anyone."

"I know, Mell," Lethro agreed, "but I can't help feeling the dog's had a raw deal. Think I'll give him another chance. After all, no one's seriously hurt."

"Next tam he keel me!" Joe's black eyes flashed his resentment. "No more weel I—"

"Want to have a look at Kadak, Mell?" invited Lethro, cutting short the half-breed's monologue.

Buttoning up their heavy arctic coats, for the first cold of winter was making itself felt, the two men stepped out.

THE log stockade in which were confined the company's dogs was but a few steps in the rear of the long warehouse behind the store. Always it was a place of turmoil, where constant bickering prevailed. So that by day the silence was incessantly cleft by sharp, discordant barks, while at night howls lifted from fifty throats in a chorus as mournful and ancient as the flaming aurora itself. To the two men now came a bedlam of snarls and yelps. Evidently a battle royal was in progress.

"They're a savage lot," commented the manager, "most of them are utterly untamed."

"What does the company do with 'em?"

"Keeps them for the use of its men. But we've always a lot more on hand than there's any call for. Climb up here on the log beside me, Mell, and you'll see a mob that would make Daniel's lions look like tame old tabbies!"

From the topmost log of the enclosure they looked down upon the screaming, bristling mass of bodies fighting fang to fang in indiscriminate rage. Young, versed in dogs, readily picked out the enormous Kamchatka Malemutes, Eskimo dogs, the huskies, Chippewan hounds, and three or four blunt-eared, domesticated dogs from the Southland. As he expected, the great majority were slate-grey Malemutes with the bushy tail, the erect ear, that marks the wolf strain.

"Where's Kadak?" Young's interest was intense.

"Under that pile, I'll bet!" Lethro's eyes twinkled with humor. "It wouldn't surprise me none if he started this rumpus. Lately he's been picking on Monte—that big Athabascan. Monte's been boss of this pack for two years. It's my opinion Kadak's getting ambitious—"

"Holy smoke, Dave, look!"

The tangled dogs had unraveled themselves as if by magic. Very businesslike they ringed about, a gaunt and silent circle. In this circle stood a powerful, dark-coated Malemute and facing him, challenging him, was Kadak.

"Good Lord!" breathed Mell Young, thrilling to the perfection of the dog.

Of gigantic size, with deep, broad chest, slender muzzle and barrel, Kadak was a thing of sheer beauty—a splendid example of the sled-dog of the North that is almost wholly wolf. His large, slant eyes were wide-set and revealed surpassing intelligence. They glowed now like live coals. Muscles rippled and flowed beneath his glossy coat of grey, as he circled aggressively about the rapier-eyed Monte. The grace and spring of a timber wolf was in every motion. Pride was the dominant note expressed by Kadak—pride unbreakable.

He turned now, and Young saw a peculiar mark across his great breast—

a zigzag streak of gleaming white. Somehow it gave him distinction, seemed to set him apart.

"Lord!" the freighter cried, his hand seeking the manager's arm. "Dave, it 'ud be a crime to kill that dog!"

"I hate like blazes to do it, Mell, but this mix-up today has put me up a tree. Joe thinks he's possessed of a devil. He'll spread that story among the Indians here. You know what a superstitious lot they are. They'll demand his death and, as manager of the Dominion Company, I can't very well hold out against them. I've got to stand in with them. See? Not one would stick by me if the report gets around that we're harboring a 'devil dog.' They'd take their furs down to Las le Marte."

"Work is what Kadak needs," he continued earnestly. "He's got to be broke. He's nearly two years old—it should have been done long ago. He's so chuck full of life he has to overflow occasionally—like jumping on Joe and tackling Monte here."

"Dave, I'd give my eyeteeth for that dog!" exclaimed Young wistfully. "Keep him till I get back from Fort McPherson next month, an' I'll take him myself."

Lethro was pleased. "It's a go!" he assented gladly.

With fresh, proprietary interest, Young's eyes followed Kadak.

Lips writhing from bared fangs, the Athabascan Malemute guarded every approach. He was a wise and veteran fighter. Coolly, calculatingly, he gave his opponent no chance to rush. Kadak grew bolder. Then—

SOMETHING detracted Monte for the merest flash of time, and Kadak made a sudden lightning rush. The pair want down, Kadak on top. The air was split by the sounds of conflict. It was the deadliest of all fights—the battle for supremacy.

In a grip that would have been a death grip but for Lethro's interference, they rolled over and over, an indistinguishable mass of fur and fury. The packed snow beneath them was fast splotching with scarlet stains.

"I've got to stop this, or be out one valuable dog!" cried the manager, snatching up the club propped against the gate and bounding within.

Mell Young tore his eyes from the scene, curious as to what could have diverted Monte at so critical a moment. Then he saw!

Leaning over the log beside him was Pierre Croisett, who had slipped up unheard and uninvited. Young noted that he, too, was strangely absorbed by the fight. That his cold, dark eyes held the thirsty light of a man who tirelessly seeks. And that this savage scene was giving him pleasure, lustful, so out of all variance, that it sickened Mell Young.

David Lethro, with the surety of one who knows just what he is about, bent over the duelists, bringing several well-directed blows down on sensitive muzzles with absolute impartiality. And Young, breathlessly watching the dog who had so intrigued his fancy, noted that, though yelps of pain were voiced by Monte, not a sound of distress issued from the throat of Kadak. Likewise, when the two were parted, it was Monte who led the retreat—perhaps in gratitude for an interruption timely for his kingship.

Kadak held his ground, shifting so that he could watch both his enemies. His deep-throated growls at the man who had struck him were so defiant, so fraught with sinister threats, that the freighter shuddered involuntarily. Kadak had too much hard-won wisdom to attack a man armed with a club. Full well he knew the advantage that lay therein. His attitude seemed to suggest his willingness to wait—wait till the odds were more equal.

Clearly the men read his thoughts, yet it only increased their admiration. In anger Kadak was superb. He compelled respect.

To Mell Young's ears came the sound of a breath harshly expelled.

"A-ah," he heard Croisett mutter in words barely audible. "I bet he keel a man queek as cat! Easee—lak not'ing!" As if he had slaked that thirst his eyes had mirrored the Frenchman abruptly walked away.

Shocked, not so much by the words as the tone in which they were uttered, the freighter stared after Croisett until the manager's voice called his mind again to the stockade.

"Bring me that muzzle, Mell, hanging on the gate," the company man directed without glancing around. "I'm going to isolate him a spell."

Then, by many strategic maneuvers, he slipped it over the snarling dog's head.

But not even the glorious Malemute could wrench Young's mind from the light he had seen in the eyes of Pierre Croisett. That light haunted him. While aiding in the segregation of Kadak, he unburdened himself to David Lethro.

"Sure as sin there's hell brewin' in Pierre's heart right now!" he concluded. "I've got a hunch—no particular grounds for it, you understand—that it centers around Jules Francois."

David Lethro started.

"Come to think of it," he said quietly, "Pierre gets his back up every time Jules is mentioned. Know why, Mell?"

For a long moment the freighter stared into the gathering twilight.

"As much as anyone," he answered slowly. "Boy an' man, them two was mortal enemies — though as far as I could see it was none of Francois' choosin'. Seems they wus just made to be rivals. Drivin', wrestlin', trappin'—always Jules was a shade the best man of the two. Then they both fell head over heels in love with Nanon Melleaux—"

"That's one time Croisett won!"

"By a crooked move!" the freighter's tone had taken on a cold, sharp edge. "She was engaged to Jules when he left for the Great Slave. I was dumfounded when I heard she'd up an' married Croisett. But I ain't amazed no more. It happens I was up on the Summit the time them two Frenchmen met, after Jules returned from winter camp to find Nanon married. What I heard sure riled me a heap. I'm keepin' my mouth shut because it's none of my business. But I'll say right here, Pierre Croisett's a snake in the grass! They say he's makin' life miserable for Nanon—"

"She never complains," put in Lethro almost defensively.

"Hell, no! That girl don't come from no breed of whiners! You'd think, now Pierre's got her, he could afford to be decent to Jules, even after that beatin'—"

"It must have been some scrap!"

Mell Young grinned.

"It was! I wouldn't have missed it for a gold mine. Pierre raved a lot up there afterward. I laid it to a brainstorm—figgered it was only natural. But now, well, I dunno—" He drew a long breath of pure, frosty air as if to rid his chest of thoughts that oppressed. Then he turned away.

"I'm countin' big on Kadak, Dave, when I get back."

"I'll keep him, Mell," was Lethro's promise.

But Mell Young was never to have the outlaw Malemute of Caribou Ford. The fate of Kadak, so far as it affected the Dominion Fur Company, was sealed long before the month was out, and in a way neither could have foretold.

III

TO be confined to a pen increased all the natural savageness of Kadak. Inactivity was torture that the few paces his cramped quarters permitted in nowise lessened. Denied all companionship, lost to all affection, it was inevitable that he should become surly and morose. With all his heart he hated man as the primal cause of this torment.

He would lie for hours, nose on forepaws, brooding. So that curious folk drawn by the stories of Joe turned away from his pen chilled and awed by the almost human look of rancour in the dog's great slant eyes. Kadak knew, nor cared, nothing for their talk of a devil-possessed Malemute. What he longed for, yearned for, to the core of his being, was freedom to live as it was meant he should live, to the pursuit of happiness as he interpreted it.

At night when the Northern Lights flashed their banners of red and gold, Kadak listened with pounding pulse to the wolf-songs in the Kalache Range. As he drank in their message his veins throbbed to the quickening of instincts natural, primordial — instincts older than the massive Kalaches themselves were old. That was his natural heritage, free, wild life in the vast, white spaces. Sometimes he lifted his slim pointed nose and echoed that song. At such times, the present forgotten, the dog was happy. Till consciousness of the degrading walls returned and the hate awoke in his breast.

Kadak's mother was a gigantic Kamchatcha Malemute, used through the long winter as a beast of burden and turned loose at spring to run wild until the recurring snow caused her to return to her master for food and shelter, as was the custom with Indian owners. In her wild state, she had mated with a white arctic wolf; and Kadak was the finest of their progeny. In body he resembled his mother. Only that peculiar forked splash of white on his chest was his father's mark. But his soul and spirit were a wolf's soul and spirit — like his father's who had roamed in blissful freedom the wilderness about Lake-of-the-Hills. However, there was this difference — and therein lay the tragedy for Kadak—from his mother he had inherited an infinite capacity for love of man. Due to the trainer, Joe, this side of his nature was darkening fast, and ever more strangely the wild called. The campfires of man, the silent spaces—cross-currents that tugged a Malemute's soul.

From his cell Kadak could see the shimmering ice-bound lake, and beyond it, to north and west, marching hordes of stately spruce climbing up, up, the mighty Kalaches, being defeated only in their climb by cold so intense no forest life could survive. Above timber-line lifted serrated, tooth-shaped peaks, sheathed in their eternal snows. That forest, those inaccessible heights, often echoed to the wild call of the hunting pack.

TIME passed and Kadak's resentment grew. In an abandonment of wrath he would hurl himself against the palings whenever man went by. He hated all men—in his mind there was no distinction. Joe, on his semi-daily rounds, carried a heavy club and often for no reason except, perhaps, innate cowardice and thirst for revenge, Kadak was made to feel the weight of it. The Malemute's pen was out of sight of the store and David Lethro could not see.

Life had not always been so bleak. Kadak had a memory-image, growing fainter day by day, of a merry, dark-eyed man, whose touch was ecstasy, whose voice was the music of the constellations that it was a wondrous privilege to obey. This dream-man had romped with him, pulled his ears with that curious sidewise motion that was sheerest rapture, while that loved voice crooned over and over, "Pup—leetle pup." With this man he had taken long jaunts, exploring together the teeming mysteries of a limitless world, mysteries of never-failing interest to the blossoming curiosity of a Malemute pup. On these explorations his little legs often became wobbly with fatigue, and then he was picked up in strong arms and tucked under a woolly coat, where he snuggled in delirious content against the man's heart.

Often in dreams he saw this man, whom he had loved as whole-heartedly as he now hated these, and the awakening was ever new torture.

Came the day when he had been transferred from all that made life the joyous, vital thing his was. From the warmth and cheer of a frontier cabin to the confusion of the big stockade. When, whimperingly, he had watched his man-god turn away, to come back and caress him once more, to whisper brokenly in his ear, "Ma pup—ma leetle pup!" and again leave, and this time not turn back.

Somehow, even in his limited understanding, the bewildered dog sensed this leave-taking to be different. This one meant farewell. Still, in his agony of grief, he clung to the hope of his master's return. Many times before he had left him and came back. Surely now he would come back.

Almost before the man's footfalls had died away, he had been set on by the company's dogs and, in all his inexperience, been forced to fight for life. Till gradually, all friendliness—the only spirit he had ever known—died a slow, lingering death, and distrust took its place.

It was not Kadak's fault that he had incurred the dislike of the trainer, Joe, so that life became a burden. As in puppyhood he believed all men good as was his master, so now did they seem to him brutes unbelievably cruel and hence to be fought and defied. This feeling grew in ratio as the memory-image dimmed with passing days.

Lying in his pen this cold November afternoon, Kadak could not know that his fate was trembling in the balance. That David Lethro's was the sole voice that championed his cause.

Ever since the outbreak the previous week the manager had insisted that the Malemute be broken to the harness. On one pretext after another the half-breed had put it off. In truth, Joe had never overcome his fear of the last experience and was well aware that each day's confinement rendered the dog more vicious. On this day Lethro was determined to brook no more delay. He arrived at this decision at an hour when the store was crowded.

"Joe," he said sternly, "if you're afraid to put a harness on that Malemute, I'll do it myself!"

The half-breed glanced up, startled. Lethro caught a glimpse of fear in his eye. But the manager had chosen his hour well. Joe could not back down in the face of so many interested spectators. Moreover he, as Lethro well knew, dearly loved an audience.

"Afred!" he shrugged, in affected disdain. "By Gar, I show you! Come."

With keen anticipation the gathering rose in a body and followed him outside.

Arming himself with a whip, made up of several thongs of rawhide, knotted at the ends, a deadly weapon, Joe stepped into the pen. While the spectators waited, breathless, he debated whether or not to muzzle Kadak. It was a precaution he longed to take, but secretly he hoped the dog would show such viciousness—could it be done with small danger to himself—that he would bring down upon his own head the sentence of death. It was well for his peace of mind he little dreamed what was to follow.

Unmuzzled, secured only by a rope about his neck, the trainer dragged Kadak into the open. To the throng the Malemute was disappointingly docile. But that very docility was a menace in itself. His eyes mirrored his intense loathing for these man-creatures applauding his degradation.

Pierre Croisett, standing a little apart, viewed the proceedings with singular intent. A careful observer would have sworn it held for him some vital, hidden interest.

A LITTLE away from Pierre, with the wife of Mell Young, was Nanon Croisett. Her dark, vivid, yet delicate, beauty, enhanced by the flaring hood of marten, her slim, lithe figure illy-concealed by the robe to match. Glorious, exotic, like an arctic poppy, was Nanon. Changing now to glance at her husband, she noted that hard, unfathomable expression and, intuitively, her heart sank.

Nanon saw Joe thrust the harness over Kadak's head. Saw the dog rear back, snarling his shame and wrath. Saw, with a cry of pity, the trainer brutally jerk him back on all fours. She heard, with compressed lips and fainting heart, the sickening thud of the terrible whip as Joe struck. Then, spellbound with horror, saw the horrid thing that followed.

In Kadak all the pent-up hatred of bitter, wretched months effervesced, exploded, in one moment of insanity. In a grey, meteoric streak he sprang upon his enemy and by the force of his plunging weight pulled him down. Screaming with terror, Joe tried to rise, did rise, both hands clutching his neck to ward off the bleaming fangs. In a frenzy the animal lunged again.

It was at this tense moment Nanon Croisett heard her husband mutter the words that were to ring in her consciousness for many months—words that haunted her long after their meaning had been made clear.

"He'll do! By Gar, he'll do!" this was Croisett's half-whispered ultimatum.

Then the hunter leaped into action. Snatching up the fallen harness, he passed the leather under Kadak's throat in a lightning-like motion at the same time twisting it tight.

A moment more, half-strangled, still furious, Kadak's jaws relaxed. The half-breed lay gasping, bleeding, barely conscious. Only the capote muffling his throat saved him from instant death. The dog's fangs missed by a fraction his jugular vein.

A dozen guns were trained on the Malemute, but fearlessly David Lethro sprang between.

"Hold on!" was his crisp command, and from force of habit they obeyed him. "Joe deserved all he got! That he didn't get worse he can thank Croisett, here. You all saw this deal. I ask you, was that the way to handle a high-spirited dog that had never felt harness?"

"Keel heem! Keel de devil-dog!" Someone shouted, and the cry was taken up.

"Kadak's entitled to a fair trial, without prejudice," the manager's distress was poignant. "It would be nothing short of criminal to shoot the dog for this attack, what—

"Keel heem!"

At this moment Pierre Croisett, having subdued the Malemute and returned him to his cage, while Joe was being carried to a nearby cabin, intervened.

"Sell heem to me, Lethro! I weel geeve mooch gol' for Kadak!"

Surprised by the hunter's earnestness, the manager studied for a moment the handsome yet repellant face before him. Much as he disliked killing the dog, death would be preferable to delivering him into the hands of the Frenchman, whose system for training dogs was well known. It was then in his dilemma he remembered Mell Young.

"Listen, everyone!" he addressed the excited mob. "I promised this dog to Young. I'll see he takes Kadak far from the post. In the meantime I'll keep him shut up, and attend to his feeding myself."

That was how David Lethro evaded a bad situation. As he entered the store he heard mutterings on every side. His verdict was unpopular. He thought little of that in his mystification at the anger that had distorted the hunter's face. Why had Croisett been so anxious to acquire the dog when he had Malemutes in plenty? Especially why, when Kadak was in the eyes of Caribou Ford a dangerous outlaw? The question baffled.

THAT night to the pen where Kadak lay in solitary confinement a dark shadow stole, a shadow at which the dog growled, bristling. Down from the shadows above a noose dropped over his head, drawing tight with a jerk. Kadak, rolling on the ground, pawed at it frantically till the blackness of suffocation ceased all efforts. When his senses returned a muzzle fashioned of rope was about his jaws and his abductor was, by merciless kicks, endeavoring to force him to his feet.

All unsuspecting, the post slept on. The uproar of the dogs in the stockade—who howled at the moon, at the crackle of a swig, for the pure of joy of howling—in nowise disturbed its slumbers.

Handicapped as he was, Kadak had the intelligence to accept the inevitable. He rose slowly to his great height. Then he followed the dog-stealer through the open gate, past the company store, and out on the moon-flooded trail.

All that night under the white arctic stars he followed the shadow's lead. They were in the forest. Moonlight was streaming between the trees. The fragrance of spruce, all the familiar scents and the hundreds of wild voices, somewhat allayed the fever in his blood. Before dawn broke the stars were obscured. Snow began falling just as they reached a point where the forest trail widened. Through the frozen, driving veil Kadak saw a rude shelter of logs and strips of hide in the clearing ahead. Around this the man led to a high pen into which the Malemute was unceremoniously kicked.

With a barrier between them the rope was cautiously unfastened. On Kadak's neck was left the collar bearing a large brass ring, so that the act of securing him hereafter would be made more safe. Then for a long moment the man peered at him from between the logs.

"So!" he muttered as the dog's smoldering eyes met his. "We see eef you be devil-dog. Long tam I hunt for wan lak you. Today you jump—ah, den I t'ink you are de wan. I steal you, for to me you are necessair. I weel starve you, wheep you. Keep de devil in your soul alive. Den weel you keel de enemy of Pierre Croisett. You weel spreeng once more, lak today. Nex' tam you weel not fail—so well I teach you. Tomorrow we weel begin."

So Kadak became the innocent instrument for a man's terrible vengeance. Vengeance only for fancied slights, for a beating he well deserved. For years of wounded vanity wherein another, superior in all things, eclipsed him fairly. The most remorseless of all revengements, since it was to avenge the death of Croisett's pride. A constant irritant to this gnawing cancer in his heart was his wife, Nanon. He had, by a lie, linked indissolubly to his life the youth and beauty of the girl, but her soul, the pure, fine spirit of her evaded him. Because of this he hated her. From her he would exact payment for his lacerated vanity by a lifetime of unmerited abuse. But the Malemute he would shape for the murder of Jules Francois.

Sure, at last, by the unfailing instincts of sound and scent that his captor was gone, Kadak examined his cage. It was a small, narrow affair of hewn timbers placed upright in the ground. Buried to such depth that he could not hope to dig under through the frozen earth. Built to such height that it was folly to think of jumping over. Yet, try both he did tirelessly, persistently, till he was spent by the effort. For whatever purpose it had been constructed pains had not been spared. It would have held a grizzly.

Over the timbers, Kadak's only shelter from the pitiless storms was a thin network of spruce boughs through which he, blinkingly, watched the snow sifting.

With the patience inborn in his breed, he settled down to wait, ignorant of his future, nor wondering what that future held. He was hungry, for he had not been fed the night before. But hunger was to become part of his life now—a tangible, sharp reality. It was to rack his body, tormenting, unbearable acute, when all other sensations of pain were dulled. For Hunger was to be the mighty chisel by which Pierre Croisett shaped him for his own villainous aim.

He listened now with quivering eagerness to the sounds of forest life, while a nameless longing possessed his heart. Perhaps he was lonely for the melee and turmoil of the crowded stockade. For one fleeting, ecstatic moment came back the memory-image of the man who had been kind. He dreamed, and dreaming heard that vibrant, crooning voice, "Ma leetle pup!" In his sleep Kadak's bushy tail thudded on the ground as he wagged it in greeting, the motion waking him to the cold and dark. Near, very near, a timber wolf bayed defiance at the storm.

At that wild, exultant cry ancient memories stirred. The dream forgotten, Kadak sprang up, listening. He was frantic to be out there, running free. He would gladly risk life to escape this prison, the blows, the curses, all that made life the stunted, heart-starved existence his had become. All—for a chance of freedom! A decision none the less noble when it animates the soul of a four-footed brute.

The future stretched black indeed for Kadak, but never so black, never so utterly without light, as the heart of Pierre Croisett.

IV

THAT night in the cabin on the hidden arm of Lake-of-the-Hills, Nanon Croisett suddenly awakened with the feeling that trouble impended. She lay for a moment rallying her sleep-numbed faculties. "Pierre!" she called, "Pierre!" There was no answer. She stretched out a hand, alarmed. The pillow beside her was empty! Where had Pierre gone? Why had he left without waking her?

Full of anxiety, she slipped on the moccasins beside the bed, flung a robe about her slim shoulders, and lit the lamp. The room sprang into light, revealing Pierre's arctic coat of caribou hide missing from its peg. What business could have called him forth in the still hours of the night? What errand that he could not tell her, Nanon?

Apprehensive, she stirred the smoldering fire and dressed. Then, with what composure she could summon, sat down to wait his return. Moments passed, anxiety-fraught, interminable.

While she kept her lonely vigil Nanon's mind, heated by suspense, flashed back to the autumn preceding her marriage seven months before. Into her memory leaped two faces—one handsome in a cold, domineering way, the face of her husband, Pierre; the other dark, acquiline, eager, full of the joy of life. Ah, how vivid was her memory of Jules! His smile, his voice, the very way his hands moved in quick, eloquent gestures full of grace.

She had loved Jules. Had become engaged to him on the eve of his departure in company with Croisett for the Great Slave Country, where they were to spend the winter trapping. That winter was an age in passing. Then, each day, when the ice was breaking up, she invented excuses for visiting the store, that she might learn if any of the incomers brought news of Jules!

Came a day—how the memory of it still pained!—when a trapper paddled up to Caribou Ford from the vicinity of the Great Slave, with the tale of one Jules Francois having taken a wife from among the Chippewans. Something youthful and joyous died in her heart that day. Yet

she kept the faith. Surely the name was common in that land—certainly it was not her Jules.

Then Pierre had returned, alone. He was very tender toward the girl. Yes, it was true. Jules had married a young squaw. But why should she grieve for that dog of a Siwash? He, Pierre, loved her, had always loved her. With him she would be happy. Many tongues whispered and laughed that she, Nanon Melleaux, the belle of the post, should be jilted for an Indian girl. Many had told Pierre they pitied her. So he went on day by day subtlely, insidiously instilling his poison, till, heartbroken by Jules' desertion, coming to feel she was the laughing-stock of the post, Nanon fled to the only refuge that offered—the arms of Pierre. The next day Father Beaupre, of the Indian mission there, made them man and wife.

With all her loyal soul Nanon tried to make up to Pierre for the love she could not bring him. Always she kept a happy face turned toward the world. She submerged her every wish, almost her individuality, in his dominant nature. Untiringly she slaved for his comfort. Their cabin was ever immaculate, full of cozy cheer, that was a marvel when one considered her limited means. And as his devotion turned to indifference, then antipathy, she excused him to herself.

Upon his marriage he had been made hunter for the post, bringing her to this cabin, the first of a chain of outposts he had established as supply bases when he must go far for game. Nanon accepted the nerve-breaking isolation uncomplainingly.

THEY had been married a month when Pierre was carried home beaten almost beyond recognition. That was the day he met Jules Francois on the Summit, and fought the battle outstanding even in that land of fistic combats. What it was over Pierre, himself, soon enlightened her.

In lacerated pride and body he was suffering the tortures of the damned. Cursing, he raised his broken wrists, so terribly swollen and discolored.

"Dog dat he ees! Spawn of devils! For dis I keel heem!" he gritted through battered lips, and his eyes flashed like lances in his livid face.

"Pierre, who done dis?" she had asked gently, sensing his utter humiliation.

"Dat devil, Francois!" The admission was the very essence of abasement.

Desperately, Nanon tried to make her voice natural, "Jules? But why?"

In his misery Pierre was seized by the desire to tell the truth, to make her agony even greater than his own.

"He beat me," he began in malicious deliberation, "because wan tam I mak de lie."

Nanon had been bathing his face. She recalled now how she had dropped the bowl and sank down suddenly weak. Even then she must have divined the terrible thing he had to tell. She remembered the leering way Pierre watched her, playing with her as a cat plays with a mouse.

"How did you lie?" she whispered. It seemed ages until Pierre's voice came again, taunting, gloating, determined to wring the last drop of joy that her suspense gave him.

"W'en I say he hev forgot."

Here the truth dawned on her, overwhelmed her, the whole awful, ghastly truth.

"Den he, Jules, hev not—marry?"

Croisett grinned evilly, "No."

He was giving her the story piecemeal.

"Den why he—not come back?" She knew her questions gave him pleasure, but she must have the truth, or, rather, his corroboration that what she divined was true.

"W'en I leeve de Great Slave Jules was laid up wit' broken leg. Almos' he die. He tell me hurry back to hees Nanon an' explain why he hev delay. Ah-hah! I do de job up good! Talk of de Jules who marry Chippewan squaw help mooch. *Certainement,* eet was not hard! Wot?"

Nanon did not hear his mocking laugh. In fact, she had no clear conception of what passed next. When once more she could think rationally she realized that a wound in her heart had healed. Jules had not forgotten—he had been ill, loving her, when her own mad act made the unbridgable gulf between. For to one of Nanon's faith there was no way back. Her vows were irrevocable and for all time.

Her respect for Pierre died in that hour when her world dropped from beneath her feet. In her extremity she had gone to the mission and came back uplifted. She was not compassless on raging, uncharted

seas! Duty, instead of love, was to be her guiding star.

Pierre's aversion to her became more marked. Dimly he was aware of the depths he had fallen in her estimation. He could not know—because his soul was gross—that the heroic girl was making a desperate fight to heal the breach between them. Curses, even blows, became her daily lot. Had she been of coarser fiber Pierre would have respected her more. Altogether the future of Nanon loomed as black as that of Kadak.

Now she went to the door and looked out. Dawn was breaking over the white expanse. A few flakes of snow touched her hot cheeks with soft, transient coolness. The downfall had just begun.

DAY was half spent when Pierre returned, haggard and hollow-eyed. He stood his rifle in a corner, and shook the snow from his coat in silence, then:

"I hear de snow an' t'ink I go hunt. Mebbe I fin' fresh caribou sign," he fabricated, avoiding her eyes. "De pos' ees short of meat."

Nanon knew he lied but said nothing. The snow had not commenced falling until morn. Pierre had been gone hours then. Moreover, only the previous day he had hauled a great sledload of freshly killed moose into Caribou Ford—there was no shortage of meat there. Then where had he been? Why should he lie about it? Nanon's forebodings grew.

That day the post buzzed with the mystery of Kadak's disappearance. The majority believed that the credulous Indians, thinking him inhabited by a demon, had spirited him away and killed him. It was incredible to the honest folk that there should be a dog-thief—that unspeakable pariah of the North—in their midst. No, he was dead, they affirmed, and were secretly glad that it was so.

David Lethro did not incline to this belief. Recalling Croisett's desire to buy the dog, the anger he displayed when his offer was denied, he felt sure the hunter was author of the crime. But the snow, coming so opportunely for the thief, had wiped out all tracks. It would be hard to prove. In any case his friendship for Nanon was potent to stay his hand. He would not add to her trouble.

It was Pierre, returning from the post next day, who broke the news to her. She heard it in shocked unbelief.

"But, no, dere ees none at de pos' so bad!" she exclaimed, incredulous. "Kadak ees dead! Dere ees no dog-t'ief at Caribou Ford. Me? I know eet!"

Pierre flashed his teeth in an unpleasant smile.

"Does de she-wolf know de heart of whelps she litters?" he retorted cryptically, and she pondered long over his words.

On the morrow he left, ostensibly on a long hunt, turning on her furiously when she begged to go with him as she sometimes did.

V

STRAIGHT as an arrow the Frenchman drove his Malemutes due north toward that hidden spot where Kadak was prisoned. As he plied the singing lash over the backs of his steaming dogs his lips curled in a mirthless grin that his eyes failed to reflect. Nanon had wanted to come. Bah! No more would he have her dragging at his heels. She must never know—none must know—what he had hidden there. Most of the winter must be spent in this wilderness retreat. He would repair the cabin. When spring came Kadak must be ready!

Kadak heard afar the musical crunch of frost-kissed runners, and sprang up, barking. He hated this man as instinctively as he had hated the half-breed, Joe. As Croisett approached the enclosure, having put up the team, the Malemute growled and muttered in his throat. The man, peering into the pen, marked with awful joy the red fire in his eyes, the savage pose.

This time Pierre carried a strong club in one end of which a hook was secured. This he thrust through the opening, cruelly prodding the dog's sensitive flanks. Pain lashed the Malemute to madness. With fiendish delight Croisett renewed the torture. Goaded to desperation the dog launched himself against the logs in a futile effort to reach his tormentor. The fierceness he displayed thrilled the hunter. He had coveted Kadak for the very traits he was now arousing. This wolf-dog had intelligence far beyond the usual run. He had strength, size and courage to back that intelligence. It amazed him that the Male-

mute exhibited no fear—proof of how little he understood the heart of Kadak. The dog knew to quail showed weakness. This man-brute must never know how those thrusts hurt.

Satiated, for the time being, Pierre slipped the hook through the ring in Kadak's collar, and so pinning him down with the club, pulled the muzzle over his head. Then, with the rope doubled about his fist, threw the gate ajar and dragged the dog outside.

Once in the open Kadak sprang upon the hunter, knocking him off his feet, and his fangs clicked with a sinister, metallic sound as they struck the muzzle.

Calmly, dispassionately, Pierre held the dog helpless and brutally bludgeoned him into submission. When this was accomplished to his satisfaction, he led Kadak away.

That was a weird and pregnated pilgrimage upon which the two embarked. The great, grey Malemute, weak from lack of food, with his pride still unbowed, stalked with graceful swing behind the silent, intent man. Over one shoulder Pierre's rifle was slung. His face, cold always, seemed frozen in grim, hard lines. It was the face of a man who had forgot God.

He spoke no word, made no sign, moved like an automaton across the sparkling field, till, threading their way through a tangle of brush, a spruce-hen took wing. Instantly Pierre's eyes lighted with lambent flame. His gun flashed to his shoulder. On the frosty air a shot rang out. Followed by a cloud of feathers, the bird dropped to the snow.

Pierre did not need the leash to draw Kadak to the spot. At the smell of blood the dog went wild. Here under his nose was warm, raw food to assuage the awful hunger. But the muzzle intervened. He pawed it frantically, slaver dripping from his mouth.

Very deliberately Pierre tore the bleeding flesh in two, and removing the muzzle, fed Kadak one half. This was lesson one in the hunter's grisly school—that the dog learn he must always depend on man to remove the muzzle that he might eat.

Later in the day two moose-birds fell at the shots of Croisett, but only a tiny morsel of each was given the eager dog.

It was significant that Pierre never fired but once when he aimed at game. If that shot missed its mark—as it rarely did—he never risked another. *One shot.* That was to be the signal that game was down—a signal that was to mean food to the starving dog. For Kadak's appetite must be on constant edge. He must learn that only on these hunts was there a chance to satisfy it.

Croisett had given his heinous course much thought. The wolf-dog must be a killer; sure death to any animal upon whose trail he was set. He must learn that only as he pursued this course unerringly was meat forthcoming. He must do no hunting upon his own initiative. Only bring down such game as he, Croisett, had wounded or allowed him to kill. Today saw the first steps toward that end.

Kadak was apt. Nature had given him those razor-edged fangs and claws as a means of acquiring food. Nature had given him the sharp necessity for food. Likewise an instinctive love for the hunt. It is not difficult to train an animal when Nature, relentless, wise old Nature, is an unwitting aid. Kill and survive, lag and perish—that was the primal law, as Kadak understood. He knew, as every wild creature knows, that the weak die and the strong flourish.

So in his hellish undertaking Pierre Croisett had two powerful allies, hunger and instinct, a redoubtable team. In addition—as it developed later—he was aided by the enormous power of habit.

The next day the two journeyed into the very heart of the white hills. This time Kadak was eager to go. Fortunately, for himself, he felt no warming toward Croisett, for Pierre would remorselessly have met the first overture with blows. The dog must hate all men. He must never feel the touch of a caressing hand. Man and brute they understood each other. Dog and man they dispised each other. To both, these trips took on the nature of a deadly serious ritual.

The second day saw Kadak advanced a step in his sanguinary training. They crossed the trail of a wolverine, and the dog, catching the scent, was all but uncontrollable, jumping, lunging, against the leash, so that it required all Pierre's strength to hold him in check. Pursuing

the tracks a short distance, they sighted the animal. Kadak's appetite had been but sharpened by the few mouthsful he was given the previous day, and now, hunger-maddened, he fought the restraining rope.

For a moment's duration the hunter hesitated. Could he safely turn the dog loose? It was a step he must eventually take. He decided to risk it. He unclasped the muzzle and ran swiftly after the bounding dog. It thrilled him to note how quickly Kadak overtook his prey, how surely he caught it by the back, snapping the spine of the wolverine by a deft, backward toss. Then it was no easy matter to drag him from his prey. But hunger prevented Kadak's bolting when food was in sight, and a rifle butt is a good persuader.

On the next hunt the Malemute, with one sweep of his rapier-like fangs, slashed the throat of a caribou calf that Pierre had wounded. Kadak was swift becoming remorseless as the North itself is remorseless.

DIMLY now Pierre saw the star of success looming on his red horizon. It would take time to train the dog beyond the chance of failure, but his patience was as infinite as his hate.

Then a blizzard swooped down from the Arctic and interrupted the journeys. Shut in his isolated cabin by the howling storm, he perfected his plan in every detail. While the wind moaned in the forest, while snow beat in driving sheets against the thin walls of his flimsy haven, he pictured with fiendish joy the death awaiting Jules Francois. Not death by the clean, quick shot of a rifle; not a peaceful, orderly death in the midst of friends; nor yet by the virile, life-conquering thrust of a knife. No! Death, horrible, prolonged. Death staring through two eyes ablaze with green, living flame. The feel of death in hot, panting breaths. The slow, awful horror of rending claws—the crunch of gleaming fangs.

He prayed death might not come too quickly. He prayed that Jules Francois would fight. He, Pierre Croisett, would watch that fight. He would be paid in full for every blow. Ah, how he would laugh, laugh—

When, after that battle on the Summit, he had sworn revenge, he had framed it with no risk to himself. He had a healthy fear of the Mounted. The redcoats were not to be fooled. They possessed an uncanny instinct for uncovering crime. At Caribou Ford he was Jules' one enemy—his was the first hand they would blame. But—

If Jules were found in the wild, mangled, indubitably slain by a creature of the wild? Ah, that would be different!

The pity of it—that he could not tell Nanon! Could not watch her writhe with the horror of it all. He might do that. She would not betray him. Yes, it would certainly add to his vengeance to tell Nanon.

It is true, the saying, that those whom the gods mean to destroy they first make mad—Pierre was more than a little mad. His plan had the daring, the subtle cunning of the insane. So he hugged the potbellied stove, while the temperature steadily fell to minus sixty, and Kadak shiveringly welcomed the snow drifting through his palisade to make for him a blanket of delicious warmth to offset the paralyzing cold. Because none knew the dark thought Pierre harbored in his breast, none could thwart it.

Perhaps his greatest crime—more awful than the one he contemplated—was that which he was committing against Kadak. He had taken the noble heart of a beast, made for a glorious love and devotion, unconsciously craving kindness and understanding, and by his merciless tutelage, was slowly, surely, deadening the dog's soul—was making of him a grim, grey fiend.

To the Malemute the memory-image came but seldom now, and was of less duration. Yet it lay, in all its joyous detail, dormant in the remote spaces of his mind. Sometimes it revived in dreams and to his ineffable rapture there came, soft as the night wind, that old, familiar voice, "Ma pup—ma leetle pup."

VI

PIERRE had been gone four days when the blizzard struck, shaking the little cabin by the lake to its foundation, half-burying it beneath smothering, white drifts. But the forest, streaming down from the Kalaches, sheltered it from the worst onslaughts of the storm. The moaning wind filled Nanon with unutterable loneliness.

She was lonely as only youth can be lonely. Nanon was barely eighteen.

Desolate and silent seemed her forest home, with the pulseless silence of the tomb. Wailing winds but voiced this corroding sense of desolation. When spring came all would be different!

Then thousands of wild birds would breed in the lake marsh. Arctic flowers would fill the air with perfume, the eye with beauty. Then nomadic tribes of Chippewan and Cree would pitch their fishing camps on the margin of Lake-of-the-Hills. Voyageurs returning to Caribou Ford by dog team and river would fill the street with merriment. How the post would ring to the husky's howl! Then the lake would teem with canoes, and all that was now bleak, frozen dreariness, would be color, gayety and life.

She wouldn't have minded the loneliness had Pierre been different. But his constant brooding, since that night when he had been brought to her, bleeding and broken, haunted her, filled her with premonitions that evil was in store. Her thoughts were disturbing company. Nanon strove to look into the future, but shrank from the black vistas, shuddering.

Despite the violence of the storm she had no fear for Pierre. His refuges were many and he had provisions in plenty, also Pierre knew the North.

It was a relief when the snow abated to get outside in the biting cold, toiling with the big wooden scoop to clear the trails, and by this work drive the dark reflections from her mind.

In all the months since she had came an unhappy bride to this forest home, Nanon had never seen Jules Francois. The post she avoided when he was there on one of his periodic trips for supplies. She knew by the taunts of Pierre that he was at Caribou Ford now. Conscientiously she had schooled herself to shutting him out of her mind. But, today, as she tossed the gleaming snow to right and left, her thoughts without conscious volition wandered to the dark-eyed youth whom in a mad moment she had believed false. Was he happy, she wondered? Did he ever—But, no! She would not think of Jules.

In this determination to rule her mind, Nanon's shovel bit deeper into the white bank, and with such zeal that the snow was sent flying, and her blood raced in her veins, causing her cheeks to grow scarlet and her great, dusky eyes to glow. Till, breathless, she paused, and saw that which drained the color from her face, almost stilled the beating of her heart.

Near her a man on snowshoes leaned on his rifle, watching her with avid gaze.

"Jules!" she whispered, her mittened hands fluttering helplessly to her breast.

He spoke swiftly, contritely, "I hev scare' you, Nanon!"

Her lips curved in a wan smile.

"I look up. I see you dere in de snow, so steel—lak ghos'. I am startle'."

Impulsively he took a step toward her, his boyish face working in emotion, his hands outflung in that old, remembered gesture.

"Nanon, I am not marry! I hev no woman—"

A glance from the girl checked him.

"I know," her tone was inexpressibly weary, "w'en eet ees too late, I know. So many tams he tell me—after."

Hungrily Francois searched her face. Yes, she was more beautiful, sweeter, more mature. The old impetuosity was gone, or subdued. This new Nanon was steadier, more womanly, with a wistfulness he had never noted of old. This, then, was the magnet that had drawn him irresistibly along the lake trail—just to look upon her face again.

"You are change'," he said simply. "Are you happee, Nanon?"

"Oui. I am ver'—" Nanon could not complete the lie. Between these two there could be no dissembling—only the truth, however bitter. In the solitudes men and women become like children, simple-hearted, direct. Up here in the shadow of the pole there was no glossing over the vital phases of existence. Life was laid bare, to its raw, pulsing heart.

"Happee?" she laughed tragically, a laugh, eerie, wild, that tore Jules' heart-strings. "Ees Nanon happee? Ma fr'en', ees de songbird happee w'en her nes' ees destroy? Ees de leetle *fleurette* happee w'en winter she come? See, Jules! All aroun' lay de lan', w'ite an' dead, w'ite an' dead—lak dat ees de heart of Nanon. All de tam w'ite an' dead—an' cold!"

THE utter hopelessness of her tone shook Jules' reserve. Came near making him forget that which he was in honor bound ever to remember—that this sad-faced girl was the wife of another.

"*Mon Dieu,* I lof' you, Nanon! Always I—"

"Lissen, ma fr'en'!" All at once Nanon seemed to acquire the cold, hard brilliancy of the snows, to become as aloof as the stars, and as unattainable. If Jules had loved her before, he worshiped her now. "I am hees woman. Dat ees all I know for *certainement.* Always I fight dis lof in ma heart. Once I t'ink almos' I die. Den I go to da missioner. I tell heem all—how bad ees Nanon. Father Beaupre, he say, 'Nanon, you are not weecked. You hev been mooch sinned against. But dat ees ovair. De pas' you mus' forget. Pierre ees your husban'—your duty ees to heem. Let heem see how noble, how true, woman can be. Mebbe eet mak heem good. Mebbe le bon Dieu hev'—how he say?—'ordain eet.' I, Nanon, know de missioner spik true—for w'hile I am not happee, I hev great peace."

Humbled, abashed, Jules could only stare at her with his soul in his eyes. Then, reverently, he pressed her fingers to his lips.

"Nanon!" he cried, and there was the pain of eternal farewell in his tone. "Nanon, show me dis peace! Show me how to steel dis pain in ma heart."

She took a few paces toward the cabin, and paused. Her voice came back musical and low, vibrant in its trenchant message, "Work, Jules. Work—an' pray!"

THE man, watching this farewell from behind the great trunk of an aged spruce, gripped the tree till his fingernails were buried in the frozen bark, nor felt the pain of it.

"Fools!" muttered Pierre Croisett, his eyes flashing insensate hate. "A leetle more of life for Jules Francois, den—de gran' finale! Dat Kadak learn queeck lak any-t'ing!"

The winter passed with laggard steps. Five heartbreaking months passed over the little cabin on the rim of Lake-of-the-Hills. Five months Pierre Croisett led over frozen trails, nor seemed ever to notice the great, gaunt wolf-dog stalking beside. Sleeping or waking the spirit of vengeance imbued every thought.

Five months of hunger, never appeased, more unbearably clamorous, passed swiftly enough for Kadak, to whom time was meaningless. He was fast becoming what his teacher meant him to become—a slayer destructive to all life. A hell-hound—with that forked streak of white, mark of the arctic wolf!

VII

WITH his mind concentrated on one hellish aim, with his soul burning with an all-consuming hate, it was natural that the hunter's mind became deranged, so that he grew steadily more morose, more taciturn, more churlish. At Caribou Ford his demeanor became the subject of much speculative comment. He avoided all unnecessary contact with his fellow man, attending to his duties as hunter for the post with increasing indifference. He displayed subtle, secretive cunning in isolating himself for long periods, so that not even Nanon knew what he was doing, nor whither he went.

Toward her his attitude was one of utter pitilessness. He rarely struck her, but his taunts and evil imaginings were more soul-destroying to her sensitive spirit than physical blows. Altogether a monomania, now, was his long-cherished revenge. Obsessing him wholly as the day of its consummation drew near.

The girl, perceiving how he altered day by day, was terrified, by she knew not what. She marked how brilliantly blazed his eyes in their hollow sockets. How gaunt, how haggard was his face. How stooped his shoulders that had been so straight. Pierre, who had been a trifle overly fastidious in dress, was ever more unkempt, more animal-like, as his character underwent its awful deterioration. She was at a loss to account for the change, but, intuitively, linked it in her mind with his frequent, unexplained absences, beginning that November night when she had awakened to find Pierre gone. With all her heart Nanon pitied him.

One morning when Pierre happened to be at home, she flung open the door to find that spring had come. The soft breeze whispered a promise of grass, and leaves,

and flowers. Everywhere, with soft rushing sounds, the bowing spruce were shaking off their snowy crowns. By noon the snow would be thawing beneath a blazing arctic sun.

"See, Pierre!" she cried, with shining eyes, momentarily forgetting the barrier between them. "Summer ees near! Yesterday I see de wil' geese flying Nort. An' now—de sun hev a bite dat weel eat de snow queeck. Soon de lak' weel be full of canoe'—"

Pierre, wolfishly devouring his breakfast, shattered her delight with an oath.

"Why not say eet?" he grated, springing up. "Why not mak' feenish of lies? Pret' soon dat dog, Francois, weel come in! Dat ees wot you mean! Ah, for dat day I wait—"

At the imminence of spring that breath of outdoors heralded, bringing the fulfillment of his dream, Pierre saw the girl through the red mist of madness. Over him surged an overwhelming instinct to kill. Suddenly he seized Nanon with muscular, powerful arms. The light of insanity flamed in his eyes, unmasked.

Though Nanon knew Pierre held her wrists, was twisting them, she felt but dimly the pain of it. His gaze held her in a trance of horror. He was going to kill her. Unmistakably she read his intent.

"Dat Francois—you lof' heem?" he shrieked, bending her wrists back till she half fainted at the agony. "You lof' heem?"

Mercilessly he continued his torture, but his sneering tone, cutting, lashing, was more unendurable than any suffering. One moment more and her soul would leap out. If she must die it would be with the truth on her lips!

Far, far away came that mocking question—

"Lof' heem?" cried the driven girl, through ashen lips. "Lof' Jules? *Oh, yes, yes—*"

Cursing, he lifted her from the floor and shook her as one shakes a rag. His intent was sheer murder. But, ere he carried it out, his disordered brain rushed off on a new train of thought—hitting on a revenge transcendent, such as only a madman could conceive. In the throes of this idea he forced her into a chair, towering over her, suddenly calm, in startling contrast to his blind flare of passion.

"De firs' tam I see Jules Francois, I keel heem," he stated coldly, with a dispassionateness that chilled her blood.

"Pierre, you mus' not!" she pleaded, adding with cunning thought, "Dere ees de Mounted!"

The hunter laughed weirdly.

"So well I hev eet plan, de redcoats could watch Francois die, an' nevaire touch me. *An' you—you shall see heem die! See hees blood run out upon de snow! Hear de deat' gasp een hees t'roat, an' you weel not know I, Pierre Croisett, hev done eet! Den am I revenge!*"

With these terrible words he left the house, harnessed his Malemutes and drove away.

Certain, at last, that the man was beside himself, the shaken girl strained her eyes after the writhing team till dogs and man had vanished in the forest.

Was he going to hunt? Should she not watch him? In his present state of mind he was dangerous to all. Ought she tell David Lethro of his threats so that Jules would be warned? But loyalty closed her lips. When Jules returned from his trap line she would contrive to watch Pierre, and prevent any mad act.

Surely, inexorably, this tense drama of the North was swift drawing to its tragic finale!

VIII

PIERRE had already forgotten the scene with Nanon when he took Kadak from his pen, and, contrary to his usual procedure, headed south, away from the forest into the foothills of the Kalaches. Travel was difficult, for the snow was soft, even in the shadow of the bleak hills. The dogs cut through at every step. But the hunter was merciless to himself and dogs alike.

With weary step Kadak kept pace. The strain of hungry months was patent in his unkempt coat, his emaciated body, in his great lack-luster eyes. He was eager, trembling eager, for the hunt. Starving for the morsel of food that was to be his when he made his kill, ere he was driven from it by the blows of Croisett—blows, the marks of which were hidden only by

his long, blood-matted hair. Kadak looked the thing he was—what the mastering hand of man had made him—a gray, fanged menace, a "devil dog" in all truth.

It was descending Whaleback Ridge that Croisett first sighted game. On the slope below was a wind-swept vale where in a magnificent moose was feeding.

Pierre halted the team with a word.

Restraining Kadak with the rawhide thong he crept near the spot, keeping the moose to windward and himself and dog in the lee of a boulder-strewn lodge. His heart beat exultantly that Kadak was as eager as he. It was meat—life—to the dog. To Pierre it meant a long stride toward his revenge.

When he reached the tracks of the bull moose, he unsnapped the rope. Quiveringly Kadak sniffed the fresh traces. He crouched, waiting for the customary signal. Suddenly the air vibrated to a rifle shot. A gray shape flashed down the ridge. Ere the startled moose was well under way in his flight that gray shape had seized it by the throat and hung there, swinging.

Terrorized, the kingly animal battled for his life, there in the secret places of the frowning hills. He knew this thing was a wolf. Yet never before had he feared wolves. To him they were cowardly creatures, dangerous only when they had worn down the resistance of their prey, unless hunting in packs and thus imbued with the courage that comes with numbers.

But this wolf was different. He did not leap in, slash and jump out of harm's way. He held fast with trenchant teeth, that sank steadily deeper. And though the moose struck again and again with his terrible cloven hoofs, the wolf-dog swung clear. Swung clear without relaxing that death-hold on his throat. Strive he did, desperately, heroically, but he could not shake it off.

There is nothing so tireless, so sayage, as a starved wolf—and Kadak, now, was almost wholly wolf.

Croisett, fearing injury to the dog, and hence disruption of all he had striven for, dispatched the moose with a bullet, driving Kadak, snarling and defiant, from what was by the grim laws of life rightly his.

Now the hunter thrilled with satisfaction at his infernal achievement. So far the dog's training was perfect. His reward was in inverse proportion to his joy—Kadak's bit of dripping meat was all inadequate. Swiftly the hunter dressed the carcass, loaded it on the sled, and turned the team homeward.

Ere he had traversed a hundred yards he saw coming toward them an Indian hunter, intently following the tracks of the moose he had slain. Even at that distance Pierre recognized him as old Tanchuck, a kinsman of the half-breed, Joe.

The inspiration came to him to put Kadak to the test supreme. To wild life, the dog was fatal, tackling, at the signal, the most forbidding prey. It remained to be seen whether he would, at Croisett's command, attack man. The dog hated man—all men—yet that meant little. The test was necessary, one he meant to undertake. He had dallied with the thought long, but there was no opportunity for the test, and it still hung fire.

Steadily the Indian came on. He did not see the team and dogs half-hidden by the ledge. He did not dream that the pinions of death hovered over him.

FASCINATED, Croisett watched his aproach. Till this doubt was ended he could know no rest, never be sure. Yes, he would make the experiment! It mattered nothing to him that he was putting a human life in mortal jeopardy. He was wholly in the grip of his obsession. Behind this determination to kill Jules Francois was the jealousy, the envy, the hate of a lifetime, capped by the terrific beating that day on the Summit. Without a qualm would he have sacrificed the whole world to this one aim.

In training Kadak he had put himself beyond punishment. If the dog killed a man, could he, Pierre Croisett, be blamed? And, with right, he could disclaim all ownership of Kadak.

By now the Indian had gone by, his tracks following the other side of the ledge were not twenty yards distant. Pierre crept toward them as noiselessly as Kadak himself. He felt no twinge of compunction as he pressed the dog's head down in the tracks. He slipped the leash, and fired!

There was not a second's hesitation in Kadak's charge. That signal meant that

he must kill. There was no reflex thought but to obey. Obedience meant food. His brain, his muscles, sprang to the call of starving tissues. Kadak had learned his lesson well.

With pounding heart Croisett ran after, and as he ran a spark of sanity flared up. He had done a foolish thing. In the death of the Indian he, himself, would suffer no harm. But man was not a moose or caribou to be so wantonly slain. Kadak would be killed! That would be the death-knell of his scheme. He ran faster, his lungs torn by the effort of his frenzied breathing. Faster yet, he might be in time.

Startled by that shot, in this untrammeled solitude, old Tan-chuck whirled. He saw the gray form bearing down on him, saw dimly the stumbling man behind. At first he did not sense that the wolf-dog was pursuing him. When he awoke to his great danger it was too late.

Too late to aim the rifle on his arm. Too late to raise it to strike. When Kadak sprang, a grey streak in the air, he pushed the weapon outward with a hard, instinctive thrust. Then the horror-stricken man was sent spinning to the ground.

He had saved himself from instant death by that rifle thrust, thereby distracting Kadak so that he just missed the throat, which was his unfailing aim.

Despite his years, Tan-chuck was wiry and strong. He put up a splendid fight. Yet, it must inevitably have been Kadak's victory had not Pierre arrived on the scene and promptly clubbed the dog into submission.

"He ees outlaw!" panted Croisett when he had muzzled the dog. "I t'ink heem broke. I breeng heem on leetle hunt an', *pouf*—he smell your track. He run. I shoot at heem an' miss. Den I come lak hell. Onlee dat I come so fas' you be dead! W'at?"

Grimly old Tan-chuck surveyed his lacerated hand. He shot a glance at Kadak. He had heard gruesome stories whispered fearfully about the campfires in the isolated lodges of his people. How the story got abroad he never knew. Personally, he had scouted the tale of a demon man who scoured the hills in company with a brother demon, who masqueraded in the body of a wolf-dog—evil spirits, who left a bloody trail. And this was the pair—the strangest pair the Arctic ever looked upon. But he had no superstitious fear. Tan-chuck was a frequent visitor at Caribou Ford. He recognized Kadak. So there was not gratitude in his eyes when he turned them back to Croisett.

"Where you catch um?" He pointed a bony, accusing finger.

Startled by the query, Pierre hesitated, floundered:

"Long tam I hev dat dog—I catch heem wild."

Old Tan-chuck shook his head.

"The dog-stealer lies!" he said sternly. "That is the 'devil dog'! Lethro will pay heap flour to know who steal um dog—"

Croisett seized him by the throat. In his tensing fingers were the strength of a dozen men. The Indian, looking into the flaming eyes so near his own, saw death there. He made motion for speech.

"Tan-chuck is mistaken," he said painfully. "He saw nothing. After all, what is it to him who catch um devil-dog?"

Shamed to the soul by his cowardice, though it had been to save his own life, Tan-chuck shambled off.

Pierre's exultance knew no bounds. *Kadak had stood the test!* The time was nearly ripe. Spring was in the air. Any day now Jules Francois might come in from winter camp!

IX

"WELL, Pierre, Francois is back," was David Lethro's genial greeting, when the hunter delivered the moose next day. "See that pile of furs on the counter? That's what he just turned in. Never seen the beat of them! All prime. Note the color and texture, will you! Marten, beaver, wolverine, lynx—and *a silver fox!* The very finest one I ever handled. Splendid luck, and I guess no one begrudges it to Jules."

Though Lethro's every word, so enthusiastically voiced, was a stab, Pierre controlled his seething jealousy under a mask of supreme indifference.

"Hear about Jules' catch?" inquired an acquaintance as he was leaving the store. The subject, gall and wormwood to the

hunter, seemed to be an all-absorbing topic at Caribou Ford."

Pierre held himself in hand till he met Mell Young on the street a moment later.

"The post's due for a little celebration tonight—sorta home-comin' for Jules," boomed the big freighter, temporarily forgetting the enmity between these two. "Better come in, Pierre. Did you hear he got a silver fox? Say, that boy's a wizard when it comes to trappin'!"

Here Pierre's forbearance snapped. Literally, he exploded.

"By Gar, eet mak' me seek for sure! Evair place I go, I hear, 'Pierre, Jules ees back!'" he mimicked with venomous sarcasm. "'Jules hev de luck! Dat Jules heem dam fine trapper!'"

The Frenchman's outburst struck Young as ridiculous, yet it angered him, too.

"I forgot you an' Francois ain't what one could rightly call *tillicums,*" he retorted pointedly. "Jist for the moment I'd plumb forgot that scrap up on the Summit. I reckon you're none too pleased Jules got back at all—"

Stung to fury by this allusion to his humiliation, Pierre cut in coldly, and Mell Young sensed a sinister meaning hidden in his words:

"You mistake mooch. I, Pierre Croisett, am ver' glad Jules Francois hev made de safe' return!"

It was sheer hell for the hunter to hear on every hand whole-hearted tributes to the man he loathed. Yet, had it not always been that way—Jules loved, respected, while he, Pierre, was merely tolerated? His overweening vanity prevented him searching his own heart for the reason why this was so. With fresh jealousy for fuel, the fever that was destroying his sanity blazed at white heat.

One week later he discovered that for which he was waiting—Francois, hoping to augment his catch until the snow was gone, was laying a trap line in the vicinity of Little Beaver. From a clump of dwarf spruce Pierre watched the young trapper cleverly fashion a snow-set in the ravine below.

Neither that day, nor the next, nor the one following, did he feed Kadak!

Before daylight one morning he said to Nanon, "I hev beeg meat cache twent' miles out. Bettair you come weeth me, eh?"

Overjoyed at the invitation, at Pierre's almost friendly tone, Nanon, with singing heart, hastened to get ready for the trail. But if she entertained the hope that their life together was to be reconstructed on the foundation of friendship, she was doomed to disappointment.

As the dogs plowed sturdily through the mush-snow Pierre maintained a stony silence, nor troubled himself to respond to her sallies, until rebuffed, sick at heart, she grew silent, too.

It was noon when they drew up before the cabin in the wilderness. Here, Pierre, with no word of explanation, left her to return shortly leading an enormous gray Malemute. The dog's terrible gauntness, his visible, awful suffering, wrung a moan from her lips. Nanon saw, with widening eyes, that peculiar zigzag streak of white upon his breast.

"Eet ees Kadak!" she breathed, horror-stricken.

Pierre's eyes mocked her strangely.

"But *oui*—eet ees Kadak!"

It was hard for Nanon to voice the shameful suspicion in her heart.

"You—you hev steal heem?"

Brazenly, sneeringly, Pierre regarded her, hands on hips.

"An' who are you to esk w'at I, Pierre Croisett, shall do?"

Stunned by his treachery in stealing the dog—the dog of his employer—still more by his inhuman treatment of it, eloquent in the animal's every move, Nanon could only look her shame.

WORDLESSLY she followed Pierre's lead out into the unknown. As they progressed over unfamiliar trails. Fear rode beside her. Fear seized her by the throat. Blanched her olive-tinted skin, almost stilled her breathing. Vague, intuitive, apprehensions that had been an inseparable part of her for long months now took form and color. Pierre's look, his manner, heightened this fear.

Pierre had no meat cache. He was lying! Why had he brought her here? She was so alone in these solitudes, miles away from any possible aid. All winter he had been so queer—had talked so wildly— For months her nerves had been

slowly keyed up. They were about to snap. And ever the tension of them grew.

In his present condition Kadak was a terrible sight. Days he had fervjdly watched for the coming of this man—for that coming meant food in some degree at least. Nights he had paced his forest cell, impatiently scenting the wind for scent of a man he hated. Only the gnawing pangs of remorseless hunger kept him company—they never left him now.

In his craze to be off, to get the meat, the all-sufficient morsel these hunts presaged, he strained on the leash. His mouth slavering, so that his broad, white chest was wet with froth.

Pierre, with eagle-eyes, scanned the long slope, dropping away from the trail in a gradual descent to the Little Beaver. It was long before he saw that for which he prayed. Far, far, below a man moved slowly across the dying snows! Instantly he stopped the team and turned to Nanon.

"Dis winter I hev train Kadak to hunt for me!" He strove to speak indifferently but his tone chilled the girl's blood. "Now I sight game. You shall stay here by dis ledge wit' team. Den you weel see how Kadak—at de weesh of Pierre Croisett—mak' de keel!"

Bewildered, the white-faced girl watched him stride off with Kadak, a magnificent, heart-breaking wreck, swinging after, till both passed from sight among the broken hills.

Slowly, surely, her forebodings were crystallizing on one dreadful, definite focus. Search as she might that barren sweep she could see no trace of the game Pierre said was there. Steadily she trained her eyes on the slope. What was that? A man—not Pierre—was moving in the valley far below. A man who stopped and worked with something in the snow! There was a certain familiarity in his movements even at so great a distance—*it was Jules!* Was there a hidden, awful connection between his presence and her being brought here?

Out of the stark loneliness of the winter passed, came fragments of speech—words flung at her in passion—*"I weel keel heem—so well I hev eet plan, de redcoats could watch an' nevaire dream I, Pierre Croisett, hev done eet. You shall see heem die—see hees blood run out upon de snow—"*

Leaping from the sled, Nanon ran down the slope that was so long, so appallingly unending. As she ran, she screamed, but her voice was a puny thing, quickly lost in the great immensity of space!

X

EXULTANT, now that his great moment had come, Pierre scoured the vicinity of the river until he found the trapper's imprints. With the eagerness of a starving wolf, Kadak thrust his nose in the tracks, sniffing deeply. Every nerve a-tingle, the madman flung off the muzzle. He lifted the rifle. Kadak rumbled one deep-throated, awful growl. Then the air was split by the crack of a rifle! As though propelled from the gun itself the great brute bounded off.

Startled by that shot so far in the hills, Jules Francois glanced up from the trap he was setting. He looked about but could see no one. Who could be hunting in the valley? Still curious, he turned his attention to the trap, forcing its jaws apart and holding them wide with a moccasined foot, while he cautiously lifted the plate to clamp it there. He had just completed the job to his satisfaction when some swift instinct caused him to wheel about.

Horror-stricken, he saw something bearing down on him. Something gray and monstrous. In a flash, he took in the blazing eyes, the gleaming, dripping fangs. A rabid wolf! That was his lightning-swift impression. He jumped for his rifle, propped against a tree nearby. As he bent to snatch it up there came a sharp, metallic click, a fearful roar—

In his cyclonic rush Kadak plunged squarely into the yawning trap. The steel jaws clamping securely on one hind foot. Impelled by his awful momentum he rolled over and over, thrashing the ground in an agony of rage and pain.

In that first flash of comprehension Jules thanked his Maker that it was a lynx trap, well set. It would hold. Then his relief, his surroundings—all—were forgotten. He could only stare transfixed at that jagged splash of white on Kadak's chest,

while a sob shook his breast and tears of pity misted his eyes.

"Pup—ma leetle pup!" he cried in a voice vibrant with love. "Ma poor leetle pup. *Mon Dieu,* w'at man hev done dis to you?"

Kadak desisted fighting the trap to snarl viciously at the man approaching. He sensed this man was utterly fearless, saw that he bore no club.

"Pup—lettle pup!"

Then came a miracle, such as few men have witnessed, or, having seen, can understand. Far back in the brain of Kadak a sleeping memory stirred. That voice! Once he had known it—loved it! This was the man-god whose touch was kind.

"Ma pup—" The man was very near.

Two years of brutality were not forgotten in an instant. Kadak was distrustful, though yearning to trust. The hand touched his head, gently, as of old, and he sprang back snarling. But his eyes belied his savage pose. His soul looked out from those great, slant eyes so lately red with passion—the soul of a noble-hearted dog aflame for love.

Jules had parted from Kadak only because his own world had toppled, and he must leave that spring on a long, hard trail to be gone until he could build it up anew. His first act upon his return to Caribou Ford was to visit the company store in an attempt to buy him back. Here he had learned of the dog's abduction from David Lethro, himself.

Now the soul of Francois was filled with one desire, to find the man who had so maltreated Kadak. That shot! Undoubtedly the man who fired it was the one he sought.

"Come, pup," he whispered, and his lips set like flint. "Come, together we fin' dis man-brute an' mak' heem pay—pay to de las' bitter drop!"

Trailing back over the tracks of Kadak, he came soon upon the sign he sought. Tracks—far-spaced! Those of a man in full flight. Bristling, Kadak sniffed them and waited.

Puzzled, the trapper paused a moment, debating how quickest to bring this man back. A shot. That would attract his attention. Would bring him back curious—as he, himself, had been curious, regarding who was near him in the desolate hills. With this decision he cocked his rifle and fired! To his amazement, Kadak streaked away on the echo of that shot.

There was no voice to tell Jules the significance of his act. *It was the signal!* The dog was letter-perfect in his part. And his loins were empty.

But now Jules was oblivious to all save the astounding fact that Nanon was running toward him! Nanon, here, in the wilderness! With her dusky hair wind-blown, with terror in her eyes! She was screaming—wanting him to stop—stop something— What?

WHEN Kadak rushed off on Francois' trail, Pierre Croisett hurried for a point above the valley where he could look down with insane glee upon the destruction of his enemy. He reached the point only to discover, to his great chagrin, that another rise farther on shut off his view. In desperate haste he raced for this knoll. But it seemed Fate was mocking him. Here a strip of dense spruce interfered.

Madly he ran in his wild effort to be in on the kill. He was in mortal terror lest he miss it. The rifle hampered his progress and he threw it aside. Breathlessly he plowed through brush and decaying drifts. At last he was forced to pause by the terrific hammering of his heart.

He had lost many minutes—he would be too late! Never now would he leer into the dying eyes of Jules Francois. But he would laugh and dance about the mangled thing that had been Jules— Not far away a rifle cracked!

Whirling, he saw storming over his tracks a Malemute, suffering, desperate—the "devil-dog" that he had created.

Vengeance was not to be his for swollen pride, earth-tramped. Nor yet was it to be Jules' for grievous wrong done the wolf-dog, Kadak. Vengeance belonged to the North. The hour of retribution had struck. And, all ignorant of the tragedy impending, Jules Francois ministered to the fainting Nanon, with that curtain of living spruce between.

Pierre Croisett saw *Death staring through two eyes ablaze with green, living flame—Death horrible, prolonged.* Endured an eternity of suspense. Then—*Kadak sprang!*

KILLER

By K. R. ELLIS

Beefer Steele was the skipper of the Raider, his guns blasting death into the defenseless dwellers of the Pacific. He didn't remember that the ocean is a relentless pursuer of its spoilers—waiting implacably for the day when exacting vengeance can be tolled.

THE LATE October sun glinted on the roiled wake of the *Sea Scout,* Western Products' killer boat, as she wallowed, chugging, in the Pacific ground swells. On the bridge stood harpooner Corky Carlson, his short, powerful body swaying with an easy, graceful rhythm. His marine cap was cocked jauntily over one ear, partly shading his pleasant, weathered face.

Occasionally he spoke in a low, resonant tone to the helmsman in the wheelhouse, and his sea-tanned cheeks creased with good humor. Sometimes, as at present, when he glimpsed the *Raider,* three miles southwest off the California coast, an icy blue crept into his gaze.

Over there was big Beefer Steele who, only yesterday at Trinidad, boasted he'd get the Company's bonus and the record. Corky recalled how Steele had shoved him at the Unicorn Bar, how he had pretended to clumsily spill his drink on his rival's laundry-fresh shirt.

"Oops—'scuse, Tow Head," he had said sneeringly, looking down. "Lookee what I've done. But I kin do better."—He spat toward a distant cuspidor.—"A heap better. Gar, even now I'm one ahead o' ye! Two days to go, heh, heh!"

Last night Corky had thought nothing of it. But today, strangely, he was growing restive, even jittery, and kept recalling past events. Yes, in eighteen years, in the Arctic Circle and off cold Canadian shores, he had seen the worst of seamen and harpooners come and go. They had to be tough to survive. And, oddly enough, Beefer Steele was the toughest of them all.

What gave Corky that empty, knotted feeling under his belt was the knowledge that Steele was a born killer, hatched in lush racketeering days long since gone.

Steele was still unmerciful and harpooned rorquals not only for high wages but because he loved it. Corky remembered how, on more than one occasion, he had stopped the death throes of a Bottlenose or a Bowhead. They were illegal and too small to be commercial, but Steele had shot them for the sheer thrill of slaughter. Somehow, by the luck of the devil, he had always evaded the Coast Guard Inspector.

On the shimmering sea, far to the west, Corky glimpsed the waving black flukes of two Sulphur-Bottoms. The course of the *Raider* told him that Steele even now was heading for the prize streamliners. Likely as not, at that very moment, he was sizing up a victim with those shifty, blood-shot eyes of his and rumbling alcoholic orders at his skipper.

Corky shrugged, dropped his weary gaze, swung around and sauntered to starboard. He turned up the collar of his pea jacket and snugged its double-breasted warmth more closely across capable shoulders.

It certainly looked like he was going to lose out, after all. If Steele and his *Raider* would only team up with his own *Sea Scout,* the way they were ordered to hunt by the San Francisco office, they would produce more whale oil for investors.

But it was useless to think about it. Beefer Steele didn't know what co-operation was. Besides, the six-month hunting season ended in twenty-four hours. Tomorrow, when the sun dipped below the horizon, he'd tallow the bow cannon and swaddle it up with an oiled tarp. In its cocoon of canvas it would hibernate until next May.

A REVERBERATING "boom" off to port plainly said that Steele was backing up his boast. Corky didn't look westward again because something closer at hand, beyond the bow of the *Sea Scout,* had caught his quick and practiced eye. There was a swirl of water, a swirl too big for a school of fish.

Calling Captain Lund to take the bridge,

The Raider rose bow-high out of the sea.

Corky hurried down the steel ladder. Light-footed he ran across the forward deck. Cat-like he sprang to the platform behind his diminutive gylcerine-cushioned cannon in the bow.

He kicked off the set-screw lever on the swivel carriage, then swung the gun for freedom. His sharp vision checked over the foreline coiled carefully under the muzzle, the precise cord binding on the harpoon barbs, the screwed-on bomb head, the set of the trigger lever. He tapped the cable where it fed from the winch through the mast pulley. Satisfied that all was in order, he stood waiting, watching the eddying patch draw closer.

Suddenly a broad back rose like a floating island. A great whistling geyser steamed upward. There was a huge sucking of air, a flash of ebony flukes, then quieting water.

"Hey Cap," Corky called, gesturing as he did so, "we better get over there *pronto.*"

Captain Lund, bulky, white-haired and genial, waved his hand. "So," he said, nodding. "Always we get more whale ven you shoot. Sure—full speed."

The engine room telegraph clanged. A new faster throb vibrated the deck of the hundred-foot boat. The thunder of the two-cylinder compound engine came up muffled and thick. A vagrant, eddying breeze brought to Corky's nostrils the acrid smell of hot oil.

As if an unspoken signal had been given, Archy, the harpoon mate, came up on the forward deck.

"Open her up," Corky called to the bridge, leaning back, at ease. Grinning he added, "Cut off the sea anchor."

Captain Lund shook his curly head. "She's wide open, doin' her damnedest. You know she's twenty-six years—"

From the bowels of the ancient converted tug came an unearthly wheezing. It rose to a scream, then descended to a snarl. Suddenly the compressed air sound died and clanking metal slowed to a dead stop.

CORKY kicked on his set-screw lever, jumped down on deck and dashed for the engine room companion.

"What the heck," he yelled. "Steve, we're on top of one!"

An elderly fellow, smudged and greasy, straightened up in the yellow glare of the oil burner. "Carlson," he said, "I'm awful sorry." He wiped dripping perspiration from his chin with a grimy neck rag and added, "She's blown a head gasket on number one."

"Bad?" Corky's anxious eyes bored down through the metal grill.

" 'Fraid so. Bert an' I'll work as fast as possible, but it's a seven-hour job, at least."

"Hell!" Corky exploded, then sought for self-control. "Okay—okay. We're right on Dead Man Reef and Steele is already shooting. Here's Cap . . . tell him."

Again on deck, Corky saw the *Raider* silhouetted on the flaming horizon, starting a drag back to the shore station. Steele had bagged a cetacean. In four hours or thereabouts he would be back. Now he was two whales ahead.

Corky tried to relax, and in the lowering dusk sauntered along the deck of the small vessel. He watched a sunfish float past, flat belly awash. Sea anemones, purple-white and semi-transparent, trailed long plastic-like tendrils across the blue-green depths. Farther down were slimy, sharp-toothed crags, the real and constant menace of this treacherous area.

It was time to eat, Corky realized, for he smelled the aroma of coffee. Archy and Swenson, one of the firemen, passed him on their way aft to the galley. It would be his turn in a few minutes.

He felt chillier than ever, for now autumn's nocturnal cold was creeping in. High up on an aerial highway he heard the quacking of ducks, for now the engine lay quiet. Off to the east, shore lights began to twinkle across the darkening water. A new sickle moon was rising over the wooded back country.

Down in the boiler room somebody was filing on metal. In the crews' quarters a self-styled Caruso was trying to sing a chantey, but it sounded worse than the filing.

When Corky came out of the galley, a short time later, he heard Captain Lund, in his quarters back of the pilothouse, sending a message on the marine radio-telephone. It was customary at this time of day. The skipper gave reports from the log and in turn asked for orders.

He glanced toward the spot where the anchor had been run out, while he was

eating. The *Sea Scout* would remain here all night, since weather permitted.

Corky yawned and stretched and realized that he was tired. Turning his back on the glamour of the night, he squeezed into the dimly lit deck quarters and softly closed the sliding door.

"RISE an' shine," somebody said in Corky's ear. "An' have we got whales!" He rolled over to see Archy's grinning and excited face in the yellow light of the oil lamp.

His mate was gone by the time that he stopped yawning. Untangling himself from the warm blankets, he got up in his underwear and dressed. He pulled on a turtleneck sweater and slipped into his heavy jacket.

In the galley he gulped a slug of coffee and listened to Cookie's gagging snores. Stepping out of the companion he hurried along the dew-wet deck and climbed to the bridge.

The air was so crisp that he pulled his cap down and turned up his jacket collar. His numbed hands sought the warm flannel lining of the slit pockets.

Captain Lund was already on the starboard end of the bridge, and several seamen moved around below. Corky leaned over the port light, straining his ears to hear more clearly. Several familiar steam-vent whistlings sounded very close at hand.

The old familiar thrill ran down the back of his neck and his scalp prickled. By the weak, lavender light of the waning moon he saw the uncertain shapes of fully ten or eleven whales. They were all around the killer boat like giant eggs in a basket, except that they were rolling, blowing and slapping the water with their flukes and flippers.

As Corky paced the bridge he briefly recalled stories he had heard; how whales sometimes mistook an anchored fishing boat for a brother cetacean. He had always considered these pretty tall tales—until now.

Cripes—Archy was right! Here were Sulphur-Bottoms, Humps—yes, even a square-nosed barrel Sperm. Why here, practically scratching on the harpoon barbs, was the finest hunting in all his eighteen years of whaling.

Sure, it would have to be the very last of the season, the end of October, the 184th day. Last call for a chance to win the company bonus, to put Beefer Steele where he belonged.

Corky almost trembled in his nervous realization of good fortune. The crew would have to be quiet, getting ready to pull out. Besides, it would be lightening up soon.

He hurried to the engine room and found everything repaired, with steam rising. With a flashlight carefully shielded, he checked his bow gun, for there must be no slip-ups now. He even examined the half dozen reserve harpoons cradled in their racks under the bridge, and two home-made depth bombs stowed nearby.

In the galley he gulped some corn flakes and fruit, washed down with black coffee. Bounding back on deck he noticed gray light beginning to edge through the remnants of night.

Corky sought out his skipper on the bridge. "Cap," he said, "let's get into deep water. We're in Dead Man Channel." Grinning, he added, "Too many rocks and too many whales."

Old Lund nodded and waggled his walrus eyebrows. "Too many? Haw—I tank you too lucky!" He slapped his harpooner on the back. "Sure we go—you say ven."

"Now," said Corky. "I want to get outside the reef before we shoot the works. We won't get this setup again in five hundred years."

THE skipper's big paw jerked the telegraph and a bell clanged below. The *Sea Scout* slowly nosed out of the channel, a delicate operation under the circumstances, but Cap managed it.

Hurrying to the bow platform, Corky indicated the sperm on the edge of the herd. The killer boat swung over and crept up. The blunt-nosed rorqual, languid and huge, spouted a low, thick spray and started down. The young harpooner aimed quickly, checked his bead and jerked the trigger.

The killer boat heeled and shuddered under the heavy explosion. Wadding rained on the smooth morning sea. Acrid powder smoke rolled aside to show the harpoon imbedded deep. The flailing flukes tossed once, then became still.

"Gawda'mighty!" Corky exclaimed. "It's

a poor, wormy invalid. That's what I get for rushing!"

Here was a sick one, sure enough. The 135-pound Swedish steel harpoon seldom got such quick results. Not even when the exploding bomb head, timed five seconds after the impact, shrapneled inside the giant heart or lungs.

Corky, however, was thankful for one thing. If whales had to be shot, he was going to do it as painlessly and quickly as possible.

Archy and a helping deck hand rushed another harpoon from the locker. Rex, the winchman, reeled in the harpoon cable. The *Sea Scout* became a fish pole and the winch a reel.

No compressed air cable was uncoiled because this fellow needed no blowing up. He was a floater. No doubt the fourteen to sixteen barrels of fluid oil in his hollow nose helped make him buoyant.

While the Sperm was being drawn to the bow, Corky unlashed a large bamboo pole. A heavy iron weight was roped to the larger end. Ten feet up the pole an old flat lifebuoy vest was tied on. At the tip of the small end a red flag was fastened.

In the water the iron weight would sink, thus raising the red flag from twelve to fifteen feet over the mammal. It would float as a marker buoy, when tied to the whale, so that the Sperm could be spotted again even miles away.

CORKY CARLSON looked back and bit his lip. It was lighter now but the channel was white with froth. Approaching another victim was going to be a job.

Humpbacks were trying to sound in the shallows. Sulphur-Bottoms, the world's biggest game, were lunging for open water at thirty miles an hour. Corky felt guilty, for likely they were slashing themselves on razor sharp rocks several fathoms down.

Smaller stragglers, the dolphins, dipped and darted for safety. Overhead gulls and gooneys flapped higher, then circled for distant vantage points.

Turning around, Corky swiveled the freshly-loaded cannon. A mighty form was rising a short distance away, ready to blow. He eased his trigger finger just in time.

The California Grey, racing seaward, was a newcomer. It had freedom of the ocean, for it was illegal to take at any time. Beside it a small Humpback polywogged along. This fellow also went unchallenged. He was too small.

Dead Man Reef was now deserted. The water around the flagged Sperm was red as wine. In the churned channel floated sea anemones, starfish and sea squirts, threaded and interlaced with stringy kelp and seaweed.

The eastern horizon was a rosy gold when Corky spotted a low, mushroom geyser in deep water. He noted massive flukes that flashed and vanished.

As the *Sea Scout* approached closer, he saw that here was a fat Humpback, a rubbery-hided clown of the whale family. Several times its warty nose poked out of the Pacific like a giant pickerel, misty geysers blew upward, its back broached, the broad tail waved and it headed down. It seemed to delight in rolling, lob-tailing, snorting and whistling. Its skin was heavily encrusted with counter-sunk barnacles, giving it an unsightly pock-marked appearance.

Corky wrinkled his nose as he guided Cap on the approach. The breath of this shrimp and sardine eater was a case, especially down wind, of giant halitosis.

"Starboard, Cap—he's coming up!"

Corky was sighting the direction bar of "Little Bertha" when the tapered, warty nose broke the surface. He made allowance for the ship's motion as he braced his feet on the folding bow wing and pressed the trigger.

"Kerwhoosh WHAM!"

Again the killer boat vibrated to a man-made earthquake. The four-barbed harpoon buried itself in another monster of the sea. This time it was no invalid.

The bull Hump gave a colossal roar, fluked the dark ocean into white foam and headed straight down.

The harpoon hawser smoked over the mast pulley, then the spliced-on cable screamed free. The winch became a deadly spinning top, as a quarter mile of line zipped out.

Rex began to use pressure and the line slowed, then started to slowly wind back on the drum. Abruptly the cable went slack. There was a foreboding pause, broken only by the chugging, hammering steam engine.

Without warning, slightly off to starboard, the ocean erupted and spewed out a huge black torpedo. In the early morning light it rose like a Gargantuan skyrocket. It seemed to pause at the top of its arch, dripping and shiny. Then it lost strength and fell back like a thousand ton meteor.

The *Sea Scout* rode the tidal wave like a cork. By now Archy and his helper had another harpoon jammed into the gun muzzle. Rex played the Hump closer in and Corky watched his chance for a second shot. In a moment there was another tumultuous explosion and another harpoon found its mark.

This time there was no leaping or diving. Two cables were sunk into the giant's back. Again the bomb head exploded deep down in the mountain of flesh and the rorqual quivered. Carefully Rex winched it to the bow.

FROM the halyard rack Corky took a long pole. It was over fifteen feet in length, its tip fitted with a splay-headed five-foot steel lance. He held it in his strong, calloused hands, waiting.

The precise moment came and he plunged it into the Hump directly below. He sawed a little with it, jerked it loose and jumped back. It was well that he did so, for a thin column of blood sprayed up, then swelled into a gushing, pulsing fountain. The life of the mammal flooded the deck and waterfalled back into the sea.

This time the air hose was broken out. Archy adjusted the perforated metal nozzle and jabbed it into the tongue. Within five minutes it was blown up like a balloon. Without this buoyancy the Hump would sink when dead.

An inch rope was coiled around the flukes and the tail drawn close to the bow. A chain replaced the rope and was lock-barred around a stanchion. The *Sea Scout* swung south and the trek back to the shore station began. Counting the flagged Sperm, to be hauled in later, the contest was now even.

But there was no use in planning. A whole day lay ahead, in which anything might happen. He couldn't hope to be back here in less than four hours, with almost the entire morning gone as the result. In the meantime Steele would be prowling —hell, there he was!

Off to the south Corky saw the *Raider* headed toward Spectre Light nearby, at the outer fringe of Dead Man Channel. The small killer boat looked golden in the sunrise, squatting behind a white bone at the bow. A rising northerly breeze was starting to riffle the blue-green water.

Corky checked up on the chain around the flukes, then went back to the galley. He wasn't really hungry, for his head ached. He was half-heartedly sampling Cookie's feather-light hot cakes when he heard a rifle shot down wind.

He whirled over the sill of the sliding door and bumped into Archy who was hurrying past.

"Cripes," said his mate, "Steele is pot shotting at a Blue with a calf!"

Corky climbed to the galley roof for a better view. The *Raider* was close now, so close that he could see Steele on the harpoon gun deck at the bow, straddle-legged and cock-sure. There was a characteristic leer on his rusty, stubbly face.

"Ya-ho-o-o!" he foghorned. "Las' day an' 'er's tha whale. Whooie!"

"The damn fool's drunk," hissed Corky, down on deck.

Corky saw Steele whip a rifle to his shoulder and deliberately shoot at the baby Sulphur-Bottom — called "Blue" in the Atlantic. The youngster jerked and dove and came up, seeking its mother's protection. Again the rifle cracked. This time the mother rolled and tossed her head. Why she didn't dive deep and far was a mystery. Possibly the baby couldn't stand it yet.

Corky's jaws clenched and cheek muscles twitched. The glint in his blue eyes became glassy. He dropped to the deck and ran to the bow.

Nearly beside himself with fury, he vaulted to the platform. He found it extremely hard not to turn the harpoon gun full upon Steele and let him have it. For the first time in his life he wanted to kill, and kill gladly.

The ex-racketeer grinned like a hyena across at Corky and, as the *Raider* drew still closer, Steele raised his dirty marine cap, then put fingers obscenely to his nose.

Corky cupped his trembling hands. For

a moment he quieted his almost overpowering rage and roared, "You damned fool—lay off! Nobody takes a cow and calf—any time!"

Steele bowed in mockery. "No?" he yelled back. "Who's gonna stop me? Can't yah see, Tow Head—they're wounded!" Again the rifle spoke insultingly and a slug tore into the female whale.

Corky turned to Cap on the bridge. "In between!" he shouted. "Full speed in between!"

Captain Lund nodded, his own face beet-red with anger. The *Sea Scout* shook with higher vibration under open throttle, but the drag of the Hump at the bow was a sheer, dead weight.

Steele seemed to anticipate the move. He turned and yelled something at his skipper. The *Raider* slowly swung over and cut in front of her sister killer boat.

"Too bad," Steele megaphoned. "These are mine. I've gotta Hump flagged back three mile. Shorty—yah might's well high-tail fer"—

SOMEBODY shouting wildly on the *Raider* interrupted him. The cry was taken up by Cookie on the *Sea Scout*. Corky heard the refrigerator lid bang down.

"Hey Carlson—Cap!" almost screamed the fellow, "over there—killer whales!"

Corky's flicking Viking eyes noted the agitated finger, then caught sight of the row of giant shapes surging in from the west.

The weight of a lead sinker gathered in his throat. A long row of dorsal fins were rising and diving in perfect military formation, side-by-side. Here were no sharks or dolphins. He noted, as they approached rapidly, their black-and-white markings, which made them appear like giant penguins. They were truly killer whales, half as big as the mother Sulphur-Bottom over there, but fully thirty to thirty-five of them!

"Cookie!' Corky shouted, whirling, "they're killers all right. Hey Archy—you fellows—help me cast off the Hump quick! Cap—full speed astern when we cut free!"

Captain Lund popped his Santa Claus head out of the wheelhouse and nodded understanding. When the load fell away the engine room telegraph jangled and the old oil burner wheezed and pounded. Reverse speed picked up, but it seemed deadly slow.

The killers, Corky knew only too well, were the same breed he had encountered in Bering Strait years before. They were sea wolves on the run, powerful, fearless and always ravenous. Stories of how they attacked whales often four times their own size were only too true. They stopped at nothing, were afraid of nothing and were good for nothing.

The thought of their cannibalistic traits nearly turned his stomach. He recollected briefly how, more than once, he had harpooned Sulphur-Bottoms with their tongues eaten out.

They were close now, bearing down on the mother whale and her calf, on the far side of the *Raider*. Corky had to look across Steele's boat in order to see what happened. He was trying to figure out what brought them here, possibly whale blood in the water, when the orcas struck like high-speed giant bullets.

The water seemed filled with dorsal fins and caudal flukes. The fury of their attack was terrible to see. No wonder California Greys floated belly up in fright upon their approach; no wonder porpoises and seals fled for their lives.

"Ya-aho-o-o!" yelled Steele. Again he brought the rifle to his shoulder and began shooting at the blood-crazed killers. One of their number lagged for a moment, creased by a slug. Instantly brother murderers swerved and tore at one of their own clan.

Corky stood behind his harpoon gun and said good-by to a seven hundred dollar bonus. They'd get his whale next. They always did. But at least he could be prepared.

He ran to the harpoon locker under the bridge and carefully pulled out one of the big cannisters, heavily swathed in burlap. It seemed to be an ice cream freezer, except that it had a flat tin lid, to which was attached a cord and ring. He picked it up gingerly and carried it to the wing of his platform, where he eased it down near the edge.

"Now," he said softly, with his smoldering blue eyes on Steele, "this has been

ready six months for killers, but I didn't figure on just one!"

There was a furious whipping of the water as the orcas abandoned the partly eaten cow and calf. Frenziedly they tore seemingly at the *Raider,* but they were heading for the ballooned Humpback, just beyond.

WHAT happened next Corky could not believe possible. Steele stood on the bow, potting at the rushing giants, then suddenly he was not there. The *Raider* rose, bow high out of the sea, then turned sideways and smacked back. The churning propeller seemed part and parcel with the tearing, ripping flukes. The wooden hull was smashed, stern and bow and midships, like an eggshell.

Corky Carlson was horrified. For a moment he saw Steele's red head bobbing in the center of the knifing caudals. A sailor was clinging to the partly submerged bridge ladder. Then the on-coming killers commanded his attention.

In a moment the insane mammals were at the Hump, and Corky saw that they intended coming farther. To them the *Sea Scout* was just another whale. They were tearing at and around the inflated Hump when he signaled Cap, picked up his homemade depth bomb, jerked the ring and heaved it away with all his strength.

The shot was well timed. In a moment ravenous orcas were on the spot. There was a mighty, muffled explosion and a plume of water soared into the air. The *Sea Scout* heaved and Corky was jerked to his knees. Fully a dozen great black-and-white bodies were blitzkrieged partly out of the water, then thudded back into the maelstrom.

Corky was getting a second depth charge ready when he noticed that the survivors hesitated near the Humpback, then dazedly headed northwest and to safety.

Cap was already edging the *Sea Scout* over to where the *Raider* had been, but there was pitifully little to be done. Remnants of the killer boat were like pieces of a dory crushed by an ocean liner. Even the sailor who had clung to the bridge ladder could not be found.

Thoughtfully Corky kicked on the set-screw lever and leaned back against his bow gun. There was still a half day of hunting with plenty of whales afloat, but now it all had very little meaning. What was a bonus against the lives of men, even the life of Beefer Steele?

He shook himself. *Take it in stride, sailor,* he thought, *take it in stride. A guy has to be tough in this game to amount to anything at all.*

"Okay, Cap," Corky finally sang out. "After you get through reporting, let's go!"

FIGHTING BREED

By SGT. DAN O'ROURKE

There were two bullies in camp; one who blasted his way with calloused fists, and one who smashed his way with an ac'd tongue. The payoff came when the fighter met the talker—and a man's life was forfeit if the wrong man lost.

I JUST got a letter from Spiky Reierson yesterday, and in it he says he hopes I'll be back in the woods with him in October. Also he says that Bully Witt has cleaned out Jim Foraker's poolroom again. Foraker had called Witt a name, and Witt got mad and threw everything out of the place but the walls and ceiling. There was nine other guys besides Jim in there, at that.

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Dave sank to the bloody snow, shook his blinded head.

But it ain't always that Witt gets the best of things. Last winter he got his needings from a little guy in a funny way I'd like to tell you about.

We was working in Spiky Reierson's camp not far from Newall, Wisconsin. Spiky is a Guernsey breeder by rights, but nearly every winter he gets the old woodsman's itch to get back to the timber. And he's one good logger. He never loses money, and that's more than lots of 'em loggers can say. Last season Witt was in the gang with us, because Spiky hated to see him without a job. Witt ain't much good for anything. He ain't feeble-minded exactly, but he's dumber than most. Spiky gave him a job as road-monkey, which don't take much brains.

We slopped along through November and December without more bad luck than could be expected. Every so often Witt would get sore and beat hell out of one of us, but otherwise everything was all right.

And then, just before Christmas, Jim Stewart, our best top-loader, went and got mixed up with a pup-hook and got ripped bad where he sits down. There was only one other skilled loader in the gang and Spiky had to send a hurry call to Newall for one. There was a week's wait, and then we got word that one would show up the first of the new year.

This new guy came the second of January. Will I ever forget that day? It was so damn cold that I was worried about my team freezing up on me. I was snaking logs out of the damnedest bunch of little hillocks and brush that I ever saw, and when the sunbeams came down through into the brush they seemed to be snuggling in to get warm.

About two in the afternoon this new guy comes down the road just as I lit in next to it with a big birch. He stops and yells:

"Are you with Reierson's gang?"

"Nobody else but," I answers, sizing him up. He was about five feet and a half, stockily built, and with a long lantern jaw. But his eyes took my notice right away. They was bigger than most and a clear velvety green like a cat's in a soft light. They had a kind of cheerful look and held to what they was seeing as steady as a pair of coast guns.

The little guy steps toward me and holds out a mitten.

"My name's Dalman, David Dalman," he says with a friendly smile.

"Mine's Aker, Bill Aker," I says, shaking his mitt. "You the new top-loader?"

"Yes. Is Reierson a good boss?"

"They don't make none better. He makes you work, but that's what he pays you for. and he's as square as a die."

Just then Babe, the chestnut three-year-old of my team, got restless from the cold and stepped ahead. The chain tightened and slapped a long blackberry briar across my nose and cheek. If you've never had the skin peeled off your face on a cold day, you don't know a thing about pain. I let a little yip out of me and nearly stampeded the horses. But this Dave was right on the job. He jumped to the bits, quieted the horses and then came to look at my scratch. He quick dumps his jimmy-bag on the ground and finally pulls out a little package. Damned if he didn't have a regular first-aid kit with him.

"Can't let the cold get at that for long," he says, pulling out some of this cotton stuff. In a couple minutes he had me all fixed up like I'd been to a field dressing station.

I was some surprised. Woodsmen don't make a habit of carrying a young hospital along with them. I asked him how come, and then I got another shock.

"Oh," he says, careless, "I got used to carrying a kit while I was a boy scout leader."

Can you imagine it? A top-loader a boy scout Sunday-schooler! I didn't get a chance to ask him more questions.

"Well, so long, Bill." And away he hoofs it toward camp.

I QUIT early that night because my face didn't feel so good, even with bandages on. I put up my team and got into the bunk-room about an hour before supper. Dalman and Spiky was sitting by the stove. Spiky hails me.

"Dalman was just telling me about your face, Bill. You should have come in right away. Let's look at it." While he was peeling off the tape he goes on: "Dalman is the only feller I ever hired that was never in a camp to learn his business. He learned his trade on that logging spud running out of Laona, and has only worked in yards since then. You fellers will have to go easy on him at first until he gets used to a small jammer. And, by the way, Dalman, you want to remember that our bunch here is a hard one. You'd better not advertise your being a boy scout leader and Sunday-school teacher. If Dusty ever hears that he'll rag the life out of you. Some of us here are good, religious church members, but you can't be too strict in a camp."

"Yeh, and what's more," I puts in, "you want to keep out of Witt's way. He's the camp bully, and fighting is the thing he likes better than anything else."

Dalman smiled in his sunny way.

"Don't worry about me. I've never lived in a camp because my wife never wanted me to be away from home, but I've worked with hard men all my life. I know how to handle them. Fact is, I've reformed many of them and made good citizens out of them. Most people go at those things

the wrong way. I just make friends and argue in a nice way. I'll get along all right."

Spiky looked at me and made a little face.

"There, you're ready to have that dressed. Go into Mrs. Breitenfeldt and have her take care of it."

Then he turns to Dalman. "Now listen, young man; you get those reforming notions out of your head. If you start to criticize men like Witt and Rhodes they'll just naturally reform your face so you ma won't know it. Bill, here, won't say a word about your being Sunday-school teacher and the like, and if you just keep to your own business everything will be fine."

Dalman's long jaw took a kind of a sudden set.

"Mr. Reierson," he says in a polite, mind-your-own-damn-business tone, "when I see a thing that's wrong, I fight it; and nothing on earth will keep me from fighting it. If another feller thinks I'm mistaken I'm willing to argue the point like a man, but no one ever shut me up by shaking a fist under my nose."

Spiky looks at this bird with a queer look in his blue eyes, tugs a couple of times on the spikes of his mustache, and then grabs me and pushes me out into the washroom.

"Well, Bill, there's no use trying to stop that boy; I can see that. The son-of-a-gun wasn't in here five minutes before he jumped on me for not having spring bunks. Said the law required it, and I was beating the law. Well, I hate to lose a top-loader, but I don't figure that guy is going to last long."

We went on into the kitchen, and Mrs. Breitenfeldt, the best cook, bar none, in the north woods, fixed me up in good shape. Then I went to my bunk and waited for things to happen; because putting a guy like Dalman into a bunch of assorted roughnecks like us was as sure to bring action as throwing the DuPont powder plant into hell.

I'VE been around this not-so-well-known world quite some little in my time. I ain't more'n twenty-eight years old, but I've been a floater ever since I quit the eighth grade. I've rubbed elbows with all kinds, from the Mex border to Nome; I've fought with butting Swedes, quarreled with gunmen, taken knives away from Canadian breeds and construction men. I know from experience that when you put a stubborn guy with a reform-bug into impolite society the results will always be interesting.

In lots of ways Spiky Reierson's camp was different from most. Spiky was a respectable Norwegian Lutheran farmer, and in camp he had several neighbors just like himself. Those fellers never got drunk, never gambled, and read their Bible regular. But along with these there was Dusty Rhodes (I know about a dozen fellers with that name, but this Dusty was in a class by himself), the hardest-looking, hardest talking baby that was ever slummed out of S. Jefferson Street, Chicago; Sam Petarsky, who'd spent several vacations in places like Joliet and Waupun; Abner Johnson, a towheaded, sappy-looking Swede who was trying to make the St. Paul police forget him and his bad habit of visiting his rich friends late at night; Shambeau, a breed from north of Superior, with a soft voice and devilish smile; and then, Witt.

To save time later, I might as well tell you that Witt was about five feet nine, with a body like a barrel, arms like a gorilla's, short stumpy legs, and a disposition you don't love to touch; he weighs about two hundred and forty pounds. As to his ways—well, he could and loved to fight; his face was handsome and he was very vain about it; his black beard was always trimmed nice and always shook when he was uncertain about what to do next.

Spiky Reierson ran this camp with good results. Spiky—his mustache gave him his moniker—was the kind of boss that could make the devil and Angel Gabriel work peaceful together and make them like it. The guy that worked for Spiky earned his money, and left feeling sorry he couldn't work for a boss like that longer. He was or is one of the best guys that ever buried his talents in a backwoods lumber camp. If I ever stayed in one state long enough to get the right to vote, I'd nominate him for president.

AFTER supper that first night Witt comes into the bunkroom after being introduced to Dalman and growls:

"Huh! They get a little feller like that

for top-loader. I wish Spiky'd give me a chance."

That was funny, and I laughs right out.

"A fine top-loader you'd make, Witt. You'd pile the logs on end."

That's where I made a mistake. Witt's beard began to tremble and he sits down on a block of wood near the stove. Then his beard gets stiff and he shoots out a long arm, grabbing me by the front of my shirt.

Now I'm no weakling. I'm six feet two and knock the scales around to a hundred and ninety. But struggling was no good a-tall when that damned gorilla got a hold. Without rising from his stool he pulls me near to him so I can't get out of looking into his big brown eyes. There ain't no anger there; he looks as calm as when he lights his pipe, but I ain't fooled none. I puts up my dukes to ward up the blows I knew was coming. Witt makes a sudden jerk with the hand holding me and whirls me around before I knew what was going on. When I land his arm is around me and my arms pinned to my sides. Then Witt turns my face so he won't hurt my sore side and slaps me so my ears ring. All of a sudden there is a scuffle and a thud and I roll free to see this little Dalman guy standing in front of Witt. Those green eyes of his was all lit up.

"Witt," he says in a tone that cuts like ice-cold steel, "you're a cowardly bully! What right have you to beat a man for almost no reason whatever?"

Witt looks at Dalman like one of these here scientists might look at a new kind of bug: just kinda curious and puzzled. And then he catches Dalman's glare and for the first time in my life I saw Witt's eyes get an expression.

Eyes are what I watch most. When a feller knocks around the world he learns to read eyes more than books. The information that comes from eyes has a lot of value when you're dealing with birds that thinks laws was made to be busted. Witt had always puzzled me because his eyes were always the same no matter what feelings might be boiling underneath. But now there was an expression something like fear only not quite. I've seen the same look in men that picked a fight and found they was too slow on the draw; and I've seen it, too, in men that was going over the top and knew somehow they was never going to do that same thing again. It's a funny look that makes a little chill start between your shoulder blades. What I couldn't figure out was why Witt got it just from looking at this little Sunday-schooler in front of him.

It didn't last long though. Witt's mouth drew into a sneer.

"Who the hell do you think you are, you bum top-loader! Do you want me to lick you?"

"Lick me? No. I'm not a fighter and I don't believe in fighting. You can't settle anything that way. Only a coward wants to fight out an argument. He's afraid to admit he might be wrong."

"Shut up!" says Witt.

"What for?" says Dave. "When I see a thing that's wrong I have a right to say it's wrong. I won't shut up when I know I'm right."

"Shut up or I'll pound you," says Witt again.

"All the pounding in the world won't shut me up unless you kill me."

"When I lick a man he shuts up," says Witt with a grin. "I'll show you."

He gets up and starts a pass at Dave when Spiky steps between them.

"Witt, there'll be no fighting in here tonight," says Spiky in a way that meant there wouldn't; and that was that.

Witt sat down.

"All right, Spiky. You're the boss. I'll lick that damn fool tomorrow."

"You will not. Fights are on Saturday nights only."

"All right. I'll lick him Saturday night," agrees Witt and goes for his pipe.

Things was quiet for the rest of that evening, but the next night we found out that Witt wasn't the only one to be interfered with.

DUSTY, Petarsky, Shambeau, Johnson was having a quiet game of poker right after supper. It was just penny-ante draw because Spiky didn't stand for anything above ten-cent limit in his camp. And at that he was easier than some. I've been where the boss wouldn't let us play for anything but tobacco—smoke-poker, we called it. While we was playing, Dalman skidded himself in next to Dusty and

looked over his shoulder. Dusty is a sociable sort of cuss and though he don't like playing more than five-handed he invites Dalman to sit in.

"Thanks," says Dalman. "I never gamble."

"Gamble!" Dusty comes back. "We ain't gamblin'."

"There's money on the table and you're betting. Ain't that gambling?"

"Hell no," says Dusty, "Penny-ante is what we're playin'. I don't call that playin' for money."

"Well, but it is money. And it's against the law to gamble."

Dusty looks hard at Dave.

"Do you smoke?" he asks.

"No," says Dalman.

"Drink?"

"No."

"Chase women?"

"Certainly not!"

Dusty whistles.

"What in billy-hell do you know about that! A top-loader who don't do nothing worth doing. Say, Reverend, what do you do to live? Where did you preach last?"

That gets a laugh. Dalman joined in as hearty as any of us.

"Well, Dusty, I enjoy life as much as anyone. There's plenty of other things in life."

Dusty picks up his hand and stays with Johnson's two-cent openers.

"Say, Sam," he says to Petarsky in a sweet little voice, "hast thou any of that Diana's nectar left on thy person?" I forgot to tell you that Dusty had got an education somewhere in his younger days. He never liked to have it mentioned, but when he wanted to make some wise cracks he'd slip us an earful of twelve-cylinder words and book-learning. Sam don't nibble a-tall.

"Says which?" he asks, trying to look intelligent.

"You ignorant Polock. Don't you know English when you see it? I says have you got any white mule left?"

"Oh, sure, sure," says Sam reaching into his bunk and pulling out a quart of moonshine. "My brother brung me another bottle this afternoon."

Dusty grabs the bottle and takes a stiff pull. He hands it to Johnson and then turns to Dalman.

"Well, Reverend, what chapter was it we left off at? You was saying something about other things in life. What, for instance?"

Dusty turns back to his cards.

"Well Abner, you dirty Swede, you opened this pot. What you sayin'?"

"Ten cents. Ay got a purty gude hand. You call me?"

"Not on a pair of eights. Now listen, Reverend, you got this good citizen stuff all turned around. It's pall-bearers like you that ought to be put where you can't do any damage. Preachers, fool women, and half-baked reformers do ninety per cent of the mischief in this world, and kids do the other ten. It's the duty of every good citizen to tear down the crepe that birds like you hang up. Otherwise this old world would be turned into a sort of a dirty waiting-room where we all took one of two trains—one to a tiresome place where we'd all dress in didies and hop around playing on a harp. 'The flowers that bloom in the Spring, tra-la'; and the other to a branch factory of the United States Steel Corporation. Do you know what kind of a world you want to make?"

"Yes. I want to make the world a place where things are run according to just rules and where there will be no crime and misery."

"How you going to do this pretty little thing?"

"By getting rid of the things that make people miserable and to break laws. We're trying to get rid of alcohol because it is bad for the health and the morals."

"Uh-huh," says Dusty, yawning and going to his bunk. "All that ails you is that you drink a different kind of moonshine than I do. Mine is a good natural product of corn. I can taste it, feel it, and know all about it. The stuff you drink comes out of poisoned brains and ain't nothing at all but fumes. You can smell 'em, but I know damn well that you don't know anything else about 'em.

"Why you poor ignorant bozo," says Dusty pulling off his blazer and rolling under his blanket, "you're just like I was when I was a nice, sweet young gentleman and took a bath regular twice a week. Ideals, I called 'em, but doggoneit, life sobered me up before I was twenty-five. No, don't say a damn word. There's no

use arguin'. You just got to get it pounded into you like I did. Now all you good citizens go to bed and let me sleep."

I crawled into my bunk with a head full of thoughts. That Dave guy sure started something when he pulled Dusty out of his shell.

FRIDAY I got transferred to jammer duty because Axel Larson's team was too skittish. There I got a chance to see what this new top-loader could do, and believe yours truly he was all there and then some. He could ride a swaying log better than I used to straddle a broncho and for all his being small he could put a lot of pep behind a canthook. Happy Schaar, whose face is so sour that he makes vinegar look like honey, was kinda grumpy because Dave was showing up better than anyone expected. At noon Spiky had put Happy at decking instead of loading, and it made him a little jealous. Anyway, near quitting time he gets near to Dave while a sleigh was pulling out empty and makes one of his semi-monthly speeches.

"Cheese'n crackers—ah—, Dalman," he says in a voice that's rusty from not being used for much besides asking for a pay-check, "I—ah—hope Witt don't—ah—kill you tomorrer night."

"What?" says Dave. "You don't think that Witt'll remember that threat, do you?"

"Huh. I—ah—don't think; I know. Witt don't know—ah—enough to forget nothing."

Dave tried to get more information out of Happy, but Schaar's record was run off and there wasn't anything more there. I figures on being helpful.

"Happy's right, Dave," I yells. "Witt ain't thought of nothing but that licking he's going to dish out to you tomorrow night."

Dave didn't look so cheerful. I could see that he didn't like the idea of being pounded a-tall. That night he went to bed without even noticing when Dusty sings out after supper.

"Say, Sam, got any of that sky-juice left? I haven't had a schnitzel since St. Peter had the measles." And he looks right at Dave when he says it, too.

Of course, everybody in camp notices that Dalman is feeling kinda sick. Spiky slips up to me at the landing next day and whispers.

"Bill, Dalman is worried about that fight. You don't think he's going to turn out to be yellow, do you?"

"Can't say yet, Spiky. But I got an idea that that jaw and them eyes don't belong to no guy that's yellow. He ain't done no fighting to speak of. Maybe he feels like I did the time I had to give a speech at a wobbly banquet in Seattle."

Spiky looks reproachful.

"I never knew you was a wobbly, Bill."

"Only to be sociable," I explains hasty. "'In Rome do as the Greeks do'—that's my motto—and if I hadn't been a wobbly at that time I'd have been lots worse off than I am right now."

Spiky laughs and I feel better. I was telling the truth and I was glad not to hurt Spiky's feelings. He's a real guy, Spiky is, even if he is kinda set on some things.

Anyway, that night after supper I don't run out to help build the bonfire to light the fighting ring. I appoints myself a walking delegate to bring Dave into the union of guys that's been licked. There wasn't going to be no slip-ups if I could help it. I hate to see a feller be yellow, even when he can't help it. I always get a sort of sick feeling in my stomach when I see a guy crawfishing.

When all the bunch is out of the bunk-room, I pats Dave on the shoulder and tries to cheer him up. He turns his face to me and I see that he is a little green around the gills.

"Bill," he says in a shaky voice, "do you think I'm a coward?"

"Hell, no, Dave. You just got stage fright. Come on. After you get punched a couple of times you'll feel better."

Dave grins a little.

"Or maybe a whole lot worse."

HE leads the way outside. It's one of these cold, clear nights with the stars shivering and the air like it's ready to break into a million pieces if you handle it rough. The clearing around the camp was on a little knoll in the cedar swamp. Over to the lee of the swamp on the west side the boys had fixed up a big bonfire out of dry cedar branches. That stuff roars like a couple of peeved lions and

showers sparks into the air by the thousands.

Dave stops to look at it and then turns his face to the stars. The light from the fire makes his face look awful pale and for a minute I think he's going to bolt. We stand real quiet and I know that Dave thinks the fire is laughing at him, the stars winking to us around him, and the shadows dancing against the cedars pointing fingers at him. I know how I felt the time I was among them going over the top. It ain't getting hurt you're afraid of; it's yourself. While Dave stands that way I almost prayed. I sure hated to see him fail.

All of a sudden I hears something like a sob and this Dave person throws back his head and marches straight into the circle waiting for him. I did a buck-dance in the snow; that's how tickled I was. Then I trots up.

"Hop at him, Dave," I yells. "Knock the hell out of that big gorilla and we'll stand you to a sody pop next summer."

"Huh!" grunts Witt. "I could lick you and this runt together without half tryin', Bill."

Right off I'm fighting mad.

"You could hey!" I says jumping into the ring. "Let's see you!"

But Spiky grabs me and pulls me back.

"Nothing doing, Bill. You've been licked about ten times already and this is Dave's fight."

There wasn't a thing to do but stay out of it.

Dave and Witt squares off, Dave holding a good boxer's position and Witt just sort of crouching with his hands nearly scraping the ground. Witt moves sudden and catches Dave on the shoulder so hard that he goes spinning into Petarsky's arms.

"Won't shut up, hey?" grins Witt.

Dave gets back into position and circles carefully.

"No, I won't shut up. I wasn't sure before, but I am now. You'll have to kill me to shut me up."

Witts starts for him, but Dave sidesteps and sends a haymaker into the big guy's beard. Witt stops and drops his hands to his sides. Dave steps in and biffs him three more, hard enough to knock an ordinary man to the birdies. As Dave steps back to look his man over, Witt chuckles way down in his muscled throat.

"Hah," he says, "did you get your fists sore? You sort of hurt my jaw, so look out."

The next two or three minutes was as confused as a woman's coffee party. Dave was quick, but that damned gorilla was greased lightning with turpentine on its tail. Talk about covering space in no time a-tall! I knew from experience how Witt could seem in a dozen places at once. He just surrounded poor Dave and when things quieted down again there was Dalman on the ground learning astronomy, and the gorilla was standing over him saying:

"Now will you shut up?"

But Dave ain't receiving any broadcasting just then. Spiky and I rub snow on his wrists and face and brings him around. He shakes his head and grins up at me.

"How many is there in that bunch up there?" he asks, pointing at Witt.

The whole crowd roars. There ain't a thing in this world that warms the heart like a guy what's game. And Dave wasn't nothing but game. When Witt repeats his question, the little feller staggers to his feet.

"Shut up! Not in this world!" And he lands a hot one on Witt's pretty nose.

Witt did something then that none of us had figured he had brains enough to do. He begins to play with Dave, clipping him just hard enough to hurt him without knocking him out. After every two or three of these painful taps he'd ask his same question and every time he got the same answer. There's only two ways of stopping a camp fight — one either quits or is completely paralyzed. This was the worst scrap I ever had to look at. That little game-cock was simply cut to ribbons, but he wouldn't quit. We was all a little sick when he finally sinks down in the red snow, struggles hard to get back on his feet, and finally rolls over with a groan of disappointment.

Even Witt, hard as he is, can't carry the thing no further. He looks hard at Dave and then walks to the bunk-house without a word. It was a regular funeral parade when we carries the poor devil into the house and stows him in his bunk. Witt came and looked Dave over and I noticed that same funny expression in his

eyes that I mentioned before. For all his dumbness, Witt saw something in Dalman that it took the rest of us longer to see.

We had to call in Mrs. Breitenfeldt to dress Dave's wounds. And, oh boy!—was she mad! She raked Spiky over the coals and made the rest of us sneak into our bunks. When she left the room she stopped in front of Witt, who was smoking near the stove, and shook her fat fist under his nose.

"And you — you big ox-bum! You should have your ears cut off yet! Beating up a nice young feller like that! Ain't you ashamed already! Shame! You damned, dirty ox-bum!"

Witt don't seem to see or hear her; he just blows big clouds of smoke at the ceiling and looks like he's thinking.

WE didn't figure Dave would be up and around the next day, but about the middle of the afternoon he crawls out of the bunk and walks to the stove where Dad Carlson is reading and explaining parts of the Bible to Jake Hoekstra, Dad rubs his long nose, kinda surprised.

"Vell, vell, Dawid. Stand you up so soon?"

"Oh, sure, Dad. I'm not soft, even if I ain't much of a fighter." He catches sight of Witt, who was watching us play poker. "Well, Witt," he sings out, "don't ever let me catch you bullying anybody again or I'll give you a worse licking than I did last night."

That brings down the house. Dave walks over to Witt.

"What good did it do to lick me, Witt? I told you that fighting never settled anything. Your way of going at things is the coward's way. You are a coward, aren't you, Witt?"

We all held our breath. It ain't every day you see a guy with nerve enough to ask a question like that of the man that has just pounded the daylights out of him. Witt just growls under his breath.

"Well, why don't you answer, Witt?" Dave goes on. "It takes a man to argue a point, don't it?"

"Shut up!" rumbles Witt.

"Shut up? Why? You tried to shut me up last night. I'm just showing you that you didn't."

Dave keeps up this questioning and talking for about five minutes and Witt sits with his head down. All of a sudden the big boy can't stand it no longer. He gets to his feet and hollers.

"Shut up, damn you, and let me alone or I'll—"

He catches Dave's steady look and stops short. There ain't a sign of flinching in Dalman's eyes. Witt's hand was back to strike, but as he stares he lowers it. Then his beard begins to tremble and he turns quick and leaves the room. Dalman walks over and sits down by the stove.

"Huh!" says Dusty sort of to himself. "Now what in billy-hell do you know about *that!* Damn you, Abner, don't sit there starin' like a bullfrog. Deal them cards."

None of us spoke.

The next two weeks was the queerest I ever lived through. Here was a little guy that was licked and he keeps chasing the feller what licked him and pesters him with questions. The first week Witt bats him once or twice and knocks him cold, but after that when Dalman showed up, Witt beat it. Of course, a thing like that was hard on our nerves. We could hardly keep our minds on our work for wondering what was coming next. For Witt it must have been hell with a ring around it.

Came the third week in January with things getting tighter every day. Spiky was getting some worried because Jimmy, Mrs. Breitenfeldt's son and cookee, was coming to forget his work while he chased out to the landing to see if anything was happening. Spiky was afraid that the rest of us might get the same way.

Most of us in camp kinda sided with Dave even though we figured he was a little too stubborn. But then, Witt was an ugly mutt to get along with and we liked to see him get a little the worst of things.

If anything, this support from the gang made Dave pester Witt worse than he would have naturally. Dave didn't stop to realize that Witt didn't have brains enough to understand this moral argument business; fact is, none of the rest of us quite understood what it was all about either. Anyway, something had to break and it did the following Sunday.

Right after dinner Dave corners Witt and begins to question him again. It was

damn cold outside and there was no place for Witt to run to except the stables, which wasn't none too pleasant. The big guy didn't like to go so he sits and listens to Dave for about ten minutes. Finally, he lets a little groan out of him and beats it outside. We felt kinda sorry for him, but when he don't come back right away we forgets all about him. Dave doesn't feel much like more arguing so he goes out to the kitchen where nobody gets to say much of anything but Mrs. Breitenfeldt.

About three hours later the outside door busts open with a bang and Witt stamps in with an ax in his hand. There's something in his expression that makes all of us gather at the inside end of the room. Witt looks all around.

"Where's Dalman?" he asks in a hoarse voice. Dad Carlson sneaks out into the kitchen while Dusty steps toward Witt.

"Where's who?" he asks, keeping a safe distance.

"Dalman."

"What you want with Dalman?"

"I'm going to kill that devil for pestering me."

Witt says that like a feller might say he's going to take a walk. Just the same all of us knows he means it. Dusty wipes his forehead.

"You're going to do which?" he asks to stall a little.

"Where is he?" says Witt louder and steps forward.

Dusty backs up.

"I don't know where he is. Do any of you bums know?" He waves a hand at us.

Witt swings his ax.

"Tell me where he is or I'll kill the whole damn bunch!" he bellows at the top of his voice.

Just then the door behind him opens and in walks Spiky followed by Dave and Carlson. Carlson tries to hold Dave back.

"What's all this noise about?" asks Spiky in a stern voice. "Witt, who said you could have that ax?"

Witt looks at Spiky for a minute with his beard trembling. He snaps it rigid.

"None o' your damn business, Spiky. You keep out of this or you'll get hurt. Dalman says he won't shut up till I kill him. I'm goin' to kill him."

Dalman broke loose from Carlson and stepped out alone. His face was kinda pale, but his eyes was steady. Witt starts for him and Dave laughs out loud. Witt stops with a puzzled expression on his face.

"So," says Dalman, "you're afraid of me. A great big man like you wanting to use an ax. Are you afraid I'll lick you?"

"Hell," says Witt, "you couldn't lick me."

"Well then, what's the ax for? Do you want to get a good ax all messed up with brains? Put the ax down and see if you can kill me with your bare hands."

WITT hesitates and lowers the ax. Spiky steps forward and takes it just as Dusty and I was about to rush the gorilla from behind. We all breathes with relief.

"All right. Now do your killing," says Dalman, his face back to normal again.

"Wait a minute," orders Spiky as Witt grabs his man. "I'm boss here and I ought to get a good chance to see this. I'll sit down by the stove and you kill him there."

Witt is so used to minding Spiky that he does just as he says, all the time hanging on to Dalman's collar.

Spiky sits down and lights a fresh cigar.

"All right," says Dalman. "Well goodbye, boys. There's just one thing more. This man has been drinking and no man should commit murder unless he's sober. Just to teach him a lesson, see to it that Witt goes to jail for life after he's finished me."

"Go ahead. Let's see the blood run. Say hello to St. Peter for me, Dave," puts in Reierson.

Now you don't want to think the danger was over. Any time Witt took a notion, he could snap Dave's neck like a pipe-stem with them big paws of his. None of us wanted to interfere because we saw that Dalman was bound to run this thing himself and take his chances.

Witt put his hands on Dalman's shoulders and, with his beard as stiff as a poker, runs his hand up toward Dave's neck. Spiky's blue eyes was as cold as steel, and he was sitting in his chair like he was made of springs. Not a bit of smoke

was coming off the end of his cigar. The rest of us stood as still as statues while Dalman's big, green eyes stared into Witt's so steady that it made a feller shiver to look at them. For a long minute that room was so still that you could hear the breeze sighing through the cedars out in the swamp.

Then Witt's beard trembled a little; his hands slowly let go Dalman's blazer; and a kind of sag came into his body. The next minute he was slumping down on the floor. He put his head on Spiky's knees and kinda sobbed:

"Spiky, he's always pestering me! Make him let me alone, Spiky."

Say! If the bunch of us had been caught stealing a bottle from a baby, we couldn't have felt more ashamed. The men looked at Witt kinda dazed and then went out of the room single file. I walks over to Dave and shakes his hand without a word. Spiky was looking sort of foolish and patting Witt's shoulder. Witt gets a hold on himself and sinks back on the floor.

"Spiky," he says, keeping his eyes on the floor, "make out my time. I gotta get to Newall tonight."

Spiky gets up without saying anything, and Witt follows him to the door.

"I'm sorry, Witt," Dave calls after him.

"Sorry, hell," growls the big guy without turning around. "You're damn lucky you didn't get killed."

When the door closes behind them, Dalman drops into the chair and droops like a wilted flower. I walks tiptoe out of the room.

AFTER Witt left, Dalman was looked on as someone lots better than the rest of us. We had to respect a man like that. But with Witt not there to keep him busy, Dalman got to paying attention to us again. Right away he starts jumping on the gambling and such again. He couldn't help it, I figure; he was built that way and had to be reforming something in order to be happy. I got it doped out that reforming took the place of the kind of amusements we had. We had lots of fun losing or making a quarter in penny-ante; he had just as much fun taking our fun away from us.

And when that boy set out to do a thing he was the stickiest customer you ever saw. Every time we sat down to play a little penny ante he was right there with a smiling face and a lot of questions and arguments. Dusty tried to reason with him for a while, but it was no use. According to Dave, things was either right or wrong, and no half ways about it; when Dusty asks him how he knew which was right, he falls back on laws, what he called "wise customs," and the like. I never agreed with him myself, but I don't know enough to argue about it, so I kept my mouth shut.

It took Dave a little over a week to make us stop playing penny-ante. One night around the first of February he slips in next to Dusty when we started to play and begins his usual arguing. None of us answers him, but after about a half-hour Dusty throws his hand down and goes to his bunk.

"Boys," he says in a quiet way for him, "I'm through. Every time we sit down to spill a few nickels this bird comes in with 'Is it right to gamble?' 'Ain't it against the law to gamble?' and is it this, that, and the other thing. Hell, I can't get no fun out of anything with that guardeen angel at my elbow all the time. I'm through, and that's all there is to that!"

Well, the rest of us was too discouraged to do anything but follow Dusty's lead.

After that Dave starts on the nips from the bottle, on swearing and, finally, on keeping clean. More than once we'd get so mad that we would want to take a swipe at Dave for luck, but we'd think of Witt and give it up. One day I says to Spiky:

"Say, Spiky, do you think there'll be many guys like Dave in heaven?"

Spiky only grins a little foolish and don't say nothing at the time. About three days later he come to me at the landing.

"Bill, I've been thinking over what you asked me the other day. It sure would be hell in heaven if they turned guys like Dalman loose up there, wouldn't it?"

"You said it, Spiky," I agrees.

Spiky looks real troubled.

"Fact is, Bill, I didn't sleep much last night thinking about it. I've studied the Bible and I'm a religious man and, according to the way I look at things, a

man like Dalman would get to heaven on a free pass. Don't you figure that maybe they've got heaven sort of divided into sections so that everybody can be happy the way they should?"

"I'm stuck, Spiky. I never thought much about religion and such matters."

And that's how it is with me. I got a lot of respect for churches and such, but I was always afraid to think much about it because it's a kind of solemn subject and out of my line. You ask me about teaming and knowing how to keep my face right with a couple of pairs of aces in my hand and I'm all there with my onions; when it comes to religion I'm among those missing.

So you see how things was.

PUT yourself in our place. Here we was in a lumber camp where things ain't none too lively at best. It's work, sleep, and eat from one day to another unless you can liven things up a little by what I call harmless amusements. And then in comes a guy like Dalman. He's better than us in pretty near every way. He's game, he's good-natured and a hard worker, he's got all kinds of nerve, and he practices what he preaches. We all respect him and give him credit for being the great guy he is. But he won't let us have anything we call fun and we can't shut him up or reason with him no way.

The camp looked like a meeting of Quakers. The only guy that had any life was Dalman and his jokes was tame.

The end of the third week in February fifteen of the twenty men in camp got together and decided to quit. Even Dad Carlson joined us.

We filed into Spiky's office on Saturday night. Spiky was doing some figuring. He looked at us with a funny little light in his eyes.

"Well, what's the funeral about, boys?" Dusty was spokesman.

"We want our time, Spiky. We can't live here any longer with Gabriel blowing his horn long before Judgment."

"Meaning Dave," grins Spiky.

"Meaning Dave," answers Dusty.

Reierson leans back in his chair and laughs till the tears run.

"Oh-ho! That's the best thing I've seen in thirty years. Here's a bunch of hard-boiled camp sardines getting scared out by a harmless top-loader like Dalman."

"Harmless, your eye!" I butts in, kinda sore. "You're the same way as we are, Spiky. This guy has got you buffaloed, too. 'Member what you said the other day about. . . ."

"Well, boys," interrupts Spiky in a hurry, "let's look at this sensibly. You know I can't afford to back Dave against the crew, and besides, as Bill says, I'm a little sick of this preaching myself. I believe in reform, but there's a limit to it. But then, I ain't got any good business reason for firing Dave. He's the best loader I've ever had and I can't give him his time as far as business is concerned. But I've thought this matter over and I'll tell you what I'm willing to do. Dave is entitled to his pay until the middle of March. That would be about a hundred and twenty dollars, figuring his board and room. I've made damn good money this season and if you boys will chip in and pay fifty of what Dave's got coming, I'll pay the other seventy and let him go tomorrow. Of course, it ain't the regular thing to do, but I believe in playing square. Anyway, in the long run you men will be ahead, because you'll all lose close to a hundred dollars by quitting now. What do you say?"

"I'm in favor of it," says Dusty. "You can knock off five dollars for my share. I've paid a judge more than that lots of times for the chance to have a little fun."

"Put me down for five," I says right away.

It don't take much sense to see that this was a money-saving proposition and in five minutes everything was jake.

Spiky grins to himself.

"Well, send Dalman to me." Then he says aloud to himself. "Here's where I get rid of another kind of bully."

Dusty was nearly to the door, but when he hears this last he wheels like he'd been struck on the shoulder by a piece of shrapnel.

"Bully!" he says. "I've been trying to think of the right word for Dave for a long time. Bully! My God, Spiky, you said it!"

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LARIAT STORY MAGAZINE

TIMBER TROUBLE

By EVAN SLYTER

Perry Bolton, the efficiency expert of the logging camps, was learning the hard way that men can't be run like machines—and that a gun packs more weight than a drafting pen.

Ananias swung the club—and a logger went blasting backward.

WHEN the door to the super's shack slammed open, "Ananias" Jones looked up with a scowl. He knew there was only one man in the logging outfit who could make that much noise merely by entering a place. And that knowledge didn't serve to put him in any pleasant frame of mind.

"Well, Jones," said Perry Bolton, tossing his felt hat upon the desk and lighting his pipe. "I went over that forty near the highway this afternoon and found plenty wrong. In spite of your lack of college training you ought to know that it is quite useless to leave a scattered growth of swamp birch where you expect to cultivate good cedar. What's more, those jack-pines on the knoll near your skidding path have no use in this world. Cut 'em out."

"I left those pines there for a deer-covert, Bolton. We won't have men to spare for that forty until next January anyway."

"A deer-covert!" Bolton's thin, leathery face drew into something like a sneer. "Good Lord, man, is this a game-preserve or a logging-camp!"

He grunted contemptuously.

"Now listen to me! The Hutton-Hoeft Company hires me as inspecting forester of its camps in order to see that the policy of scientific forestry is carried out. I'm not here to respect the nice sentiments of nature-lovers. I get results and I expect you to get them. Tomorrow we'll go over your time-sheets to see if we can't arrange a scheme of labor-circulation that will be more efficient. I'll wash up for supper now, and tonight give you a few tips on labor-handling." Bolton jerked his wiry body erect and left the office.

Jones looked from the closed door to his scaler and pal, John Johnson, who was grinning at the ceiling.

"Ain't he the sweet boy wonder, Baldy! Twenty-four years old and wiser'n Solomon's thousandth wife! Why the devil do big guns in the logging-game have to send around smart kids to tell *me* my business! If ever a young feller suffered from a swelled dome, young Bolton does. Bah!"

Johnson's round blue eyes twinkled. "He ain't suffering from it, Ananias; he's enjoying it."

"All the time telling me how much he knows!" muttered Jones. "I hate braggarts!"

"Ha-ha-aa!" erupted Johnson, his booming laugh shaking the walls. "That's a good one! Hearing you howl about other folks bragging is like hearing a elephant yelling about the room a mouse takes up. Why don't you look in a mirror, Ananias? Don't make me laugh again. I'll get fat."

Ananias grinned at his friend's squat, round figure. Then he sobered. "By gosh, that's an idea, Baldy! Young Bolton ought to see himself in a good mirror once. If it didn't kill him it might do him some good."

JONES thought over the idea during the two hours that passed before he again was closeted with Bolton in his office. After Bolton had given a great deal of advice on the efficient handling of labor, Ananias sat back in his office chair.

"Much obliged for all these tips, Bolton. You handle these figures pretty near as well as the way I handled the onion fever trouble on an onion plantation in Bermuda one time.

"You see, I went in as overseer on this plantation where they only employed onion labor, and every man on the place had onion fever—eyes running, bad breath and high temperature with delirium. To get efficiency I had to cure the fever. I did it with ammonia and charcoal. I even put up signs that read: 'Your best friends won't tell you, but they'll offer you charcoal.'

"Now my problem there was practical you see."

Bolton laughed. "Oh, yes. Very practical, Jones. But isn't my problem practical, too?"

"Yeh, but in a different way. You really know how to handle labor on the hoof, as you might say?"

"Absolutely. I have definite ideas on the subject."

"Good! I've got a problem that'll give you a chance for a demonstration. We're building a spur-track into the southwest forty, and Callahan, the construction boss, is having trouble with his laborers. Think you could show him how to make things go smoothly?"

"Certainly. I take it that Callahan is too easy-going."

Jones repressed a smile. He tried to picture Callahan as easy-going, but the effort was a failure. However, he slapped his knee enthusiastically.

"Right! How'd you guess it! Suppose we go over there tomorrow morning and show him how to do things right."

"Glad to be of help, Jones, but not until tomorrow afternoon. I want to finish the inspection here at hand first."

"Fine! Then it's all settled. If you

can fix up this labor situation, I'm telling you that you'll have my everlasting respect."

BOLTON'S inspection work took him longer than he had expected. It was four in the afternoon before he was ready to make the trip to the construction camp. Jones suggested that the trip be postponed until morning.

"How far is it?" asked the inspector.

"Three miles through virgin timber. You'd have only an hour to do your demonstrating."

"Plenty of time, Jones. I can give Callahan the necessary pointers as easily in an hour as in a day. I'm not tired. Let's go."

Bolton had not been in camp long enough to know the lay of the land in the direction of the construction camp. An inspiration seized Jones. Instead of hitting due south toward the objective, he led his man toward the southeast.

His plan was to make a wide arc and approach the construction camp from the south instead of from the north. To keep his companion from noticing direction changes Ananias kept up a continuous flow of conversation, taking care to compliment Bolton artfully. The young man glowed under the treatment.

"Yessir, Bolton, to be such a young man you certainly can deliver the goods. Makes me think there might be some good in college training after all. I always figured that the best education needed a lot of practical experience to round it out, so to speak, but you seem like an exception to the rule," remarked Jones after he had drawn the inspector into some intimate conversation which had obviously made the changes in direction unnoticed. The twists and turns taken to avoid bad places in the virgin timber, Jones was sure, had Bolton completely lost.

"Oh, I don't say anything about practical experience," returned Bolton. "One needs that to round out theory. It's too bad that you couldn't have gone to school yourself, Jones. You have the stuff, I'm told, but lack of scientific training is a handicap."

"Must be so," agreed Jones. "Listen. Do they tell you in college which came first, the seed or the tree?"

"Why, no. That's just a silly question, of course. It's scarcely important."

"Just what I thought. Sort of a gag, as you might say. Now telling the age of that white pine over there is something more sensible. How old is it?"

BOLTON paused and studied the indicated tree closely. Jones saw that he was trying to count the annual shelves of branches.

"Well, I'd guess that tree to be about sixteen years old, Jones. Rather hard to say exactly though."

"It's twenty-two years old to the day almost, Bolton. Yours was a bum guess for a forester, if you'll excuse me for saying so. You can estimate closer'n you did by figuring the height from one shelf to the next."

"Well, I haven't practiced eye-measuring tree heights as yet. If I thought it important I'd make myself expert in it."

"H'mm. Important! Suppose I asked you to cruise this section and give me the scale on the stump. Wouldn't a good eye be important?"

Bolton flushed. "I thought we were going to this construction camp. Aren't we almost there?"

"On our way. Don't get excited. I admit I'm a little disappointed in you."

Ananias winked at a blue-jay that cocked a curious eye at the passing couple. "Pretty little scene down this slope through the gaps in the boughs of that lightning-scarred hemlock over there, isn't it? To a nature-lover it's pretty. Maybe to a business man it means only so many dollars on the stump."

"Trying to be sarcastic, eh?" shot back Bolton, very red of face. "I haven't time to be admiring vistas. How far to this camp?"

"Just a few hops, skips, and jumps. And I ain't sarcastic. I was just talking. Notice the scar on that solitary oak up there on that rock hill? Know what made it?"

"No. I'm not interested."

"S'funny. That was where a nice fat black bear sharpened his claws just a few weeks back. No, he was a thin bear, come to think of it. Thin and hungry. Just got a good start toward getting fat. Got a gun with you?"

"No. I didn't think there were any dangerous animals in this region."

"Not dangerous. Only maybe a little

skittish if you are careless around them. Even bob-cats and lynxes aren't really dangerous except at night. Ever get lost in the woods?"

"No," said Bolton shortly.

"Foolish question, wasn't it? A real rip-roaring college-trained forestry expert couldn't get lost. Well, just a little ways to go."

Jones grinned when he noticed that Bolton took his bearings at the moment they came in sight of the new spur track. The young man wouldn't find those bearings very helpful, but so much the better.

JONES and Bolton picked their way over the new-laid ties to a quartette of swarthy Sicilians who were plying their tools half-heartedly.

"You watch 'em a minute while I find Callahan," suggested Jones.

"These men will direct us," returned Bolton. "Here, you men," he demanded authoritatively, "where's your boss?"

As the laborers looked up in surprise, Jones stepped behind Bolton and made a significant gesture with his fist. Jones then walked rapidly past the Sicilians and on down the track. Bolton's progress was barred by a man with a threatening pick. Jones grinned when he heard:

"Who the hell you think you are, huh?"

A few strides took Jones around a bend in the track. He pretended not to hear Bolton's voice call: "Jones, Jones, come back here!" There was an unmistakable tremor in the voice.

Ananias found Callahan, a burly heavy-chinned man, supervising the laying of steel. Jones made some brief explanations. The Irishman grinned.

"Goin' to be tough on the bye, don't ye think? Pinello is wan av the bunch back there. He is a fightin' Dago, that lad."

"Just the thing. Bolton will believe that you're having trouble with the gang. He'll try out his iron hand. Maybe it won't work so well."

"Thanks to ye, ye schemin' divil. Here they come."

And they were coming—Bolton about three steps ahead of two pursuing laborers. The moment the laborers saw Callahan they turned and ran back to their work. Bolton, angry and panting, confronted Jones.

"What do you mean by playing me a trick like that! Is this Callahan!"

"Uh-huh. Callahan, meet Mr. Bolton."

The inspector glared at the gang boss. "Why," he demanded, "don't you teach your men to respect authority! I've a good mind to have you fired!"

Callahan's jaw dropped from astonishment. Then it set. His powerful hand grasped Bolton's coat.

"Ye'd have me fired, would ye, ye pasty-faced mutt! Would ye first be explainin' how ye come to be interferin' with me crew!"

"Let me go! Do you know that I'm your superior!" Bolton tore himself free. "Why, you incompetent gorilla, one word from me to the home office will be enough to let you out."

Callahan put a brawny arm on his hip and affected a feminine smile. "The divil ye say! And since when did the home office be sindin' out maddlin' young idjits to tell me how to run me gang!"

He dropped his arm and spat on Bolton's new boots. "Let me tell ye, bye, that it makes no difference to me if ye are the Emperor o' Chiny. I'm boss here till I'm fired and be damned to the likes o' ye. Jones, take the dude out o' here before I lose me timper!" He turned away. "And don't be bringin' him back!"

Ananias stifled a smile at the sight of Bolton's face. The young man looked as though he might explode at any moment.

"Well," remarked Jones apologetically, "seems like your demonstration didn't go over so good. Now, you said you could handle men. What did you run away from Pinello for?"

Bolton glared at Jones, swallowed hard, and then turned on his heel.

"Shut up!" he said thickly. "Let's get back to camp! I'm not through here yet. And I'm not through with you."

"O. K.," said Jones. "Lead on. Home it is."

Bolton took his bearing and started off to the south; Pine Camp lay to the north. Ananias smiled and followed.

AN hour later Bolton stopped and looked about him in puzzlement. Several times Jones had subtly directed his companion off the straight line until now the two were in the heart of a twenty-acre patch

of white pines. The light from the setting sun could scarcely penetrate the gloomy aisles of this natural temple. In all directions there were straight columns supporting a roof of green. Underfoot was a carpet of needles as soft and springy as a mattress. The air was filled with the subdued murmurings of the lofty branches that swayed gently in the light breeze. Jones took off his cap in homage to the perfection of the scene. He was aroused by Bolton's voice.

"I say, Jones. I can't remember coming this way."

"You don't mean to tell me that you're lost! You, a forester!"

"Not exactly lost. I know my directions, but I'm not sure of the camp's location."

"What good are directions if they lead nowhere!" demanded Jones. "If you're lost, be man enough to admit it."

"I see through you all right, Jones. You did this purposely in order to humiliate me. A childish trick!"

Ananias sat down and grinned. "Listen, young feller! You came into my camp with a head so swelled that if you'd been in Germany somebody'd have mistaken you for a Zeppelin. I took you out to teach you what you ought to know—that if you want to parade like a peacock you got to have as much to be proud of as a peacock has. Otherwise you need to be a little human when you're dealing with human beings. Efficiency and business give me a pain. They don't mean a thing besides getting a living. I run my camp on the idea that my men are men, not a bunch of cogs in a damned machine.

"Now you're here to find out that you're as human as the rest of us. You can feel humiliated and have your pride hurt just like you hurt everybody else's pride. It'll give you a chance to look at yourself in a mirror. I'm leaving you now. If I were you I'd curl up and go to sleep. Maybe tomorrow you can find your way out."

Bolton leaped toward Jones and grasped his coat.

"No, you don't. You're taking me out of here now. Otherwise there'll be another woods boss at Pine Camp."

"Yeah? Think again, young feller. Tag; you're it."

Ananias tripped Bolton and sent him sprawling. He then dashed off into the gloom. He heard the inspector call and run after him, but he dodged around and lost him. Bolton gave up the chase after a few minutes. Ananias circled around and watched his man from the shelter of a tree-trunk. Bolton cursed loudly and shook his fist in the air. He then looked around him and sought to get his bearings. Until the sun went down the young inspector walked aimlessly. Jones followed at a distance. In the dusk, Bolton shook his head hopelessly and sat down.

ANANIAS left Bolton to his thoughts, for he knew that no harm could befall him. He reached camp late, and received a thorough scolding from his wife for playing a mean trick on the inspector. Ananias merely grinned.

At dawn the next morning Jones and Johnson went out to fetch Bolton. They found him fast asleep at the foot of a large pine.

Bolton said nothing while he ate the breakfast Jones had brought. His face was pinched and pale, but it was as unrelenting as ever. After breakfast he rose and brushed his rumpled clothing.

"Now, Jones, lead me back to that construction camp. I'll demonstrate the value of your Sunday School lesson."

"Going to handle men?"

"I am. Come along."

Jones winked at Johnson. They set off for the construction camp. They reached it while the crew was breakfasting. Callahan scowled when he saw Bolton.

"And now what!" he demanded.

Bolton picked up a car-stake of convenient size. Very calmly he hefted it and cleaned it by rapping it sharply on a boulder.

"Work begins at seven, does it. Callahan?" he asked.

"It does. In tin minutes, to be exact. And ye won't be here then. Ye're goin' now."

"Interesting," remarked Bolton, his eyes narrowing. "How do you know?"

"I'm sendin' ye."

"You know I'm your superior; yet you'll use force?"

"Right ye are. Start now? Or will I be marchin' ye?"

Bolton looked around at the watching crew, smiled, and then suddenly swung

his club. It hit Callahan behind the ear and sent him sprawling, dead to the present events.

The inspector leaped to the fallen man's side and pulled a revolver from his pocket. He twirled the cylinder of the weapon expertly and shot at a tin can lying some thirty feet away. It leaped into the air. Bolton hit it again before it struck the ground. He looked meaningly at the scowling members of the crew and tucked the gun into his pocket.

"Work starts promptly at seven, men. I'm your boss today. I know how to lay steel, and how to lay it rapidly. The tie-setting squad will help with the rails until ten o'clock, and from then on will work like hell to keep ahead of the steel. Understand!"

The crew members nodded somberly. There were many dark glances toward Bolton. The inspector turned to Jones and Johnson, who were staring at him in amazement.

"Jones, you will help handle rails today. John, you will be my straw-boss and jump when I give you an order. Put Callahan into his tent and bring him around."

Ananias hesitated. Then he grinned and nodded to Johnson. They picked up Callahan and put him inside his tent. Water and a slug of moonshine brought the Irishman to. He blinked and then leaped to his feet. Still groggy, he stumbled outside and fell near Bolton. He got up and stood weaving.

"Lad, I'm goin' to break ye in two right now!"

Bolton raised his eyebrows and sneered. He waved the club threateningly.

"Callahan, you're going to lay steel today. One false move and I'll crack your skull. If that won't work, I'll wing you with a bullet from your gun. I mean business."

Callahan grabbed for his pistol pocket and cursed when he found the weapon gone. Jones put a hand on the foreman's arm.

"Better wait, Cal. Let's see what Sonny Boy can do."

Callahan breathed deeply, but finally nodded.

Promptly at seven the men began to work. Under the watchful eye of the inspector the track-laying went on rapidly and smoothly. Jones labored beside Pinello and a half-breed named Rochambeau. The half-breed was muttering under his breath at the end of an hour.

Within two hours the sullenness had extended to the rest of the crew, for Bolton was driving them mercilessly. At eleven o'clock one of the Sicilians threw down his tools and demanded his time. Bolton ordered the man back to work. When the Sicilian refused to obey, Bolton clubbed him into submission. There were no more quitters that morning.

JONES knew that an explosion was overdue. To the crew, Bolton was an interloper. What they might have borne from Callahan they would not bear from this dude. At noon Ananias tried to persuade Bolton to call the demonstration a success. The inspector's reply was calm.

"Try to quit, Jones. Try even to pick up a club like this one. I showed you that I could use a gun. You'll do as I say. I'm your boss and can prove it. If you and your gang of rats can't understand authority without force, I'll show you force and plenty of it."

"Uh-huh," returned Jones. "Well, maybe you'll learn something from this if it doesn't kill you."

He said no more, but he talked with Johnson and Callahan.

"The byes won't stand for it," said Callahan.

"Want to try taking away his gun?" asked Jones. "You know you never allowed another in camp."

"Sure, I know. The man's crazy!"

"My fault," admitted Ananias. "I never dreamed the boy had it in him. I'll have to think of something."

But he had no time to think. The men rose to go back to work at one o'clock. From out of a group walking toward the track, a stone was thrown. It struck Bolton on the shoulder. The inspector whirled, and ran toward the group. At once, three laborers from another group leaped upon Bolton. He went down, fighting desperately at close quarters.

Jones, realizing that the inspector's life was at stake, flung himself into the tangle before the laborers could use their ever-ready knives. He knocked one man out, threw another aside, and jerked Bolton to his feet.

"Now, fight, you fool!" shouted Jones. "Back toward the box-car!"

Johnson and Callahan guarded the retreat. The four men gained the shadow of the car and fought with their backs to the end of it. There was a brisk exchange of blows before Pinello took the lead and pulled his men back.

"Give us da boss-dude!" yelled Pinello. "We let reg-lar bosses go!"

Bolton drew his pistol. "Come and get me, you scum!"

THE crew shrank back. Jones sighed with relief. The gun would enable them to make a get-away. But he reckoned without the shrewdness of the half-breed, Rochambeau. While the gun still waved a hustling figure dropped onto Bolton from the top of the box-car behind him. The pistol was sent clattering into the midst of a pile of rails that lay beside the right-of-way. It exploded harmlessly as it slid out of sight between the heavy steels.

Rochambeau rolled free and ran laughing to his comrades. Jones pulled Bolton back into the ranks as a knife whistled over his head and embedded itself in the car. Johnson climbed up the car ladder, but found no more attackers there.

"You geeve us thees man, yes?" shouted Rochambeau, balancing a knife in his palm suggestively.

"Now, listen, byes," said Callahan. "This man is a big boss of the company. You hurt him and you make plinty trouble. Let him go now and we'll call the whole thing square."

"And then we getta fired, huh?" shouted Pinello. "No. We give him hell first. Then we quit."

The crew advanced. Before they could rush Johnson let out a joyous whoop and charged them, his squat, powerful figure breaking into the line of men with disastrous effect. Jones cursed his friend's foolhardiness and followed him.

The two veterans of rough-and-tumble, by sheer weight and long experience, kept themselves moving and accounted for five of the gang before they ran back to the car. Pinello, the leader, was one of those stretched out on the ground. The gang, ordered by Rochambeau, reformed its lines and drew knives.

"At 'em all together!" ordered Jones. "Our only chance is to play through the bunch and break for the woods! Hit hard and don't be afraid to use your feet!"

The quartette charged, Bolton held back by Callahan's long arm until Jones and Johnson could dispose of the gang leaders. Rochambeau threw his knife at Johnson, who ducked and stopped it with the leather jacket he was taking off as he ran. Two other knives were thrown, one of them missing and the other tearing into Jones' sleeve.

JOHNSON reached the gang first, his leather jacket swinging into the face of Rochambeau. The half-breed, blinded, was bowled over by the heavy scaler, whose fist crashed into the jaw of the man behind. Jones avoided a swinging knife by leaping high into the air and knocking two men down. He was tripped, but he was up with a man on his shoulders. He flung the man bodily into the group behind and cleared a space around him. Callahan and Bolton leaped into the breach. Fighting alone, and laughing at the top of his bull voice, Johnson was using his two hundred pounds to make other space in the ranks of the crew.

A mob is never dangerous unless it meets with some success. This mob, with a half-dozen of its leading lights completely extinguished, soon turned into a band of sheep. It broke up and scattered in all directions. Jones and Johnson, bloody and with clothes torn, picked up Rochambeau and Pinello. Holding them on their shoulders they led the way to Callahan's tent.

Callahan was beaming as he mounted a stump and shouted to the scattered crew.

"Byes, I'm stayin' right here to begin work whin ye're ready and no questions asked. Pinello and Rochambeau will be goin' back to work the minute they come around. The big boss and the loggin' fools are leavin' now. 'Tis a promise I'm makin' that there'll be no firin' of help. Ye know I niver break my word."

From a distance there were nods. Jones, Bolton, and Johnson went their way unmolested.

Bolton said nothing during the trip home. He said nothing the next day when he had finished his work in the camp. Ananias asked no questions.

When he was about to leave Bolton came

into the office and wearily sat down.

"A copy of my report will be sent to you, Jones, from the home office. I have given you some favorable comment, but I have recommended methods by which you could increase the efficiency of your labor supply.

"Now as to our personal relations: I think that you are a little too well satisfied with yourself and your wisdom. In your views on handling labor I think you are about right, however. One can be too harsh, perhaps, when labor is full of silly notions about the rights and privileges of a democratic country."

Bolton smiled crookedly as he rose and held out his hand. "Good-bye, Jones. You don't hold a mirror very well. You mentioned out in the woods that I was a conceited young puppy, and in that you were just half right and half wrong. I'm going to remedy my faults so that I won't get lost in the woods again. I'll know how to estimate age and height of trees when I come back here. Much obliged for showing me up on that score."

He turned to leave, but paused at the door. "And, by the way, I thank you for saving my life. You know I was very angry about being left in the woods all night and I guess I went a little too far. Tell Callahan that I've given him a recommendation for a raise. He knows his onion labor, that man." Bolton laughed under his breath as he closed the office door from the outside.

Ananias scratched the back of his ear reflectively.

"Hmmph!" he said at last. As though in response, the door opened and Johnson's bald pate entered, closely flanked by its owner. Ananias held up a finger to his pal. "D'you know, Baldy, I like a feller as conceited as Bolton!"

"You ought to. He's no more conceited than you are. And he can't lie half as fast as you do. And he can't brag within a couple hundred miles of you. You made a fine mess of curing him!"

"Shut up. That ain't it at all. I like him because he's so conceited that he tries to live up to it. Imagine a guy so proud of himself that he'll do the right thing just because he thinks he's so good that he can't do anything else. He's giving Callahan a raise, because he thinks that's the big thing to do and he thinks Bolton is such a big guy he can't do anything small. There's conceit for you, Baldy! He reminds me of a feller I used to know down in. . . ."

Johnson rushed for the door. "I'm going to tell your wife to come here. You're feeling a lie coming on." The scaler guffawed as he dashed out of the door, closely followed by a brass paperweight that Jones threw.

CHECHAKO FROM TEXAS

By LEE FLOREN

The Texan was walking directly into a tundra murder-trap, springing the jaws of death about himself, so that his .45's could avenge a partner who had disappeared in the snowy wastes.

Balsam shot once, went down, coughing horribly.

WHEN BILL WILSON regained consciousness, he lay on the floor in the kitchen of the restaurant. The tall cowboy sat up and shook his throbbing head. Surprised, he stared at the trapper and the cook who stood and looked at him.

"What happened to me?" he asked, dazedly.

The halfbreed trapper answered. "I fin' you outside in the alley in the snow. You was knocked cold, so I carried you in here. That was fifteen minutes ago, no, Felix?"

"Yes, said Felix.

"Somebody's slugged me," growled Bill, angrily. He got slowly to his feet. "Did you see who did it, trapper?"

The trapper paused. "No," he finally said. Then he added, "Don't pay to see much—or know much—in Cut Bank."

"You scared of Jed Balsam?"

"Me not scared of nobody, fella. I jus' smart."

The trapper turned and went out the door. The cold mountain air, rushing in after him, swept fog-like toward the hot stove. The bony cook rubbed his scrawny hands together

"Sure cold outside," he said.

Bill said, "Sure is," and fingered his skull gingerly. He figured he had been slugged by something broad because his skin was unbroken. His Stetson hat was on a chair and he picked it up. He saw the high crown was cut.

"You see who slugged me, Cook?"

"Frenchy LaQuist hit you with a canoe oar. I seen him."

Bill frowned. "Frenchy LaQuist, huh? Ain't he Jed Balsam's breed partner? Wasn't that him I saw in the Ace Saloon this mornin'?"

"That was him."

"Thanks," said Bill.

"You been in Cut Bank town before?"

Bill grinned. "No. I jus' got into town about an hour ago. Staked my canoe out along the river an' thought I'd get a drink an' a bite to eat. I went down to the Ace, seein' an ol' barkeeper friend of mine was tendin' bar there, an' he pointed out this LaQuist dog to me. Then I headed for your place here to eat, an' the next thing I knows I'm wakin' up here on your floor."

The cook looked puzzled. He studied Bill's high-heeled riding boots, his twin .45's and their hand-tooled gunbelts, glanced at Bill's wide-brimmed Stetson.

"You a river man, fella?"

Bill grinned. "No."

"You a trapper?"

"I'm a cowboy, cook."

"What you doin' up here in the trappin' country?"

"I—lookin' for a friend of mine, Butch Wade, the U. S. Deputy Game Warden. You know Bill?"

"He was in here a week or so ago," the cook said.

"Which way'd he go?"

"I think he said he was goin' into the mountains an' stop beaver trappin'. But I ain't sure, fella."

Bill smiled grimly. "That's where he went. An' Jed Balsam an' Frenchy LaQuist an' their gang was doin' the beaver trappin'. That's why French slugged me. He aimed to kill me. He musta foun' out I was goin' into his trappin' country lookin' for Wade."

"Maybe so," the cook agreed.

Bill wolfed a plate of hotcakes, his brow furrowed. He paid the cook and pulled on his hat and went outside.

It was ten below out. And Bill's range-clothing wasn't made for winter work. The frost cut through his light shirt. It nipped his ears. The town of Cut Bank was almost buried under the snow.

Bill stomped his cold feet and cursed. Dang an old fool like Butch Wade, anyway. Pulling out in the mountains in such weather, and then getting lost.

Or was Wade dead? Had Jed Balsam and his gang killed Wade? Bill didn't know, but God help Jed Belsam and his beaver poachers if they'd killed Wade. Anyway, he'd clear up this mess, and get back to his old home range and stick to a man's living, punching cows.

"Danged ol' fool of a Wade," he muttered. "A man that'd hole up in this hell of a country outa be shot."

IT was still ten miles up-river to Jed Balsam's trading-post, Wolf Landing. Bill went toward his canoe, banked on the edge of the fast-flowing Whitefish river. He wasn't much of a hand with a paddle, but somehow he had managed to paddle this far.

Frenchy LaQuist, he figured, had meant to kill him. But Frenchy had run when the trapper who had found Bill had come into view. Frenchy had tried once, and Bill knew he would try again.

Bill went to his canoe and took his pack. He slipped into the straps and then, toting his rifle, he struck out toward Wolf Land-

ing on foot, his Justin boots crunching the powdery snow.

The pine trees stood high and green. The scent of spruce filled the snappy air. A covey of blue grouse flew from a bullberry bush thicket. Dawn slowly changed to the brilliance of morning.

An hour later Bill halted on a pine ridge and looked down at the foamy Whitefish river. Carefully, he ran his fieldglasses over the wilderness below. He saw five head of deer grazing in a clump below and, beyond the deer, three moose were drinking in the river.

Bill frowned. Maybe he had guessed wrong. Maybe Frenchy LaQuist had not left Cut Bank. Anyway, Frenchy had not paddled this far up the river. For if he had, the deer and moose would not be along the river now—Frenchy's coming would have scared them into the deep buckbrush.

Bill moved his gaze slowly down the river. Finally he located LaQuist, who was hidden in the brush along the river. His back was to Bill and he was settled on his haunches, his rifle across his knees as he watched the river.

Bill grunted, "Danged ambusher."

Unseen by LaQuist, Bill wormed his way down the mountain. Unnoticed, he slipped through the high brush. He thought he went silently but, when he came to the clearing behind the spot where LaQuist should be, the beaver-poacher was gone.

Bill stared. Suddenly a cold voice spoke from behind him. Swiftly Bill turned, but already a rifle-barrel was jabbed against his back.

"Drop your rifle," that voice ordered.

Frenchy LaQuist stood there, a satanic smile on his thick lips. He was a lanky man dressed in buckskins and moccasins. His black, stringy hair fell to his shoulders.

"Drop that rifle, Wilson!" he repeated.

Bill stalled. "How'd you know my name was Wilson?"

LaQuist grinned crookedly. "Butch Wade, he talked about you. How you'd come"— The 'breed stopped suddenly. He cocked his rifle. The click of the hammer sounded loud in the snowy silence. "For the last time, drop that rifle!"

Bill did. "How'd you know I was comin' in behin' on you?" he asked. "You ambushin' hound-dog, I seen you squattin' here with your rifle ready to kill me when I come paddlin' up the river!"

LaQuists's grin widened. "You no timber man. You make too much noise when you walk with those boots. I hear you come an' turn the traps on you, no?"

"What'd you aim to do now?"

La Quist frowned. "Kill you, I guess."

"Like you killed Butch Wade?"

"We didn't"— LaQuist's black brows drew together. "You know too much, Wilson. You know about Jed Balsam an' me trappin' beaver, no?"

"I sure do," said Bill.

Desperately, Bill's mind was searching for a way out of this. From what he gathered by LaQuist's conversation, Butch Wade was still alive. And he, Bill Wilson, couldn't help Butch Wade by getting killed.

But LaQuist had a rifle on him. Even now, the barrel of the gun was jabbed in his belly. Bill had to act quickly, and he did.

He kicked suddenly and savagely, his right boot smashing against LaQuist's shin. The blow, totally unexpected, drove LaQuist back a pace. Bill heard LaQuist's startled yelp of pain, and LaQuist let his hammer fall.

The gun roared smoke. But, catlike, Bill had twisted to one side, grabbing the gun-barrel as he turned. The bullet tore through his mackinaw. And then whistled harmlessly across the clearing and buried itself in a pine tree.

Then Bill and the 'breed were struggling for the gun. Brute strength against brute strength. The gun-stock creaked and then the weapon broke at the lock. LaQuist got the stub of the wooden stock, and Bill got the barrel.

LaQuist cursed, and struck with the stock. But Bill's part of the rifle, crashing down, clipped LaQuist behind the ear. LaQuist went down like a heart-shot moose. Blood flowed from under his muskrat cap. It colored the white snow.

Bill stood, panting.

HE frowned. What would he do with LaQuist? The 'breed was just knocked out. If he left the trapper here and went on, then LaQuist would come to and warn Jed Balsam he was coming. Or hell, Balsam probably knew that, already.

Bill cut some strips from LaQuist's

buckskin jacket and bound the trapper's hands and feet, then he rolled LaQuist into the thick brush. Maybe LaQuist would freeze to death, but Bill did not care. The only thing Bill wanted now was to get Butch Wade and hightail it out of this god-forsaken cold country. He wanted to get back on the plains where he could toast his shins in front of a bunkhouse fire.

Two hours later, he topped a ridge, and looked down on Wolf Landing. The town consisted of three long log buildings perched on a bend in the Whitefish. The biggest building, according to what he had heard, was the trading post of Balsam, who also swindled the Blackfeet Indians out of their peltry by the use of whiskey and knock-out drops.

The other two were bunkhouses used by Balsam's trappers. Of course, most of the trappers would be out on their traplines, now.

Bill sat crosslegged in a clump of rose-bushes, munching dry jerky and wondering which building, if any, housed Butch Wade. Also, there was no use in trying to enter Wolf Landing during the day. Whatever operations he made, would of necessity have to be done in the dark.

The winter days were short. Dusk came at about three that afternoon and soon it was dark. Kerosene lamps and tallow candles were in the windows below him. They threw their yellow light out on the snow.

Carrying his rifle, Bill went down the slope. He knew there would soon be a full moon. He had no definite plan of procedure. Had he known where Butch Wade was, he would have had a plan to get him free. But he did not know.

When he got to Wolf Landing, he slowed his pace, and he sidled up against one of the buildings, intending to creep along the wall until he got to the window. Maybe, by keeping in, he could learn something.

The snow was deep and powdery and it scuffed against his boots. His feet were cold and he had taken off his right mitten so he could handle his rifle easier. Cold tingled through that hand. The snappy air stung his lungs when he breathed.

Once he paused and drew back against the dark building. His muscles were tense and for once he forgot the cold. There was a moment of silence and then he heard voices come from the trading-post, some fifty yards away. The door opened and a man came out dressed in a parka of wolf fur. He followed a path that ran to the building beside which Bill crouched. Then he entered that building and all was silent again save for the distant sound of the wind in the pines high on the peaks.

Bill started forward again, but he never got very far. For something crashed down hard across his head and, for the second time that day, he was knocked out. It happened so suddenly that he didn't have time to see who had hit him, or what his assailant had hit him with.

WHEN he again came to, he thought he felt a dog licking his face. At first, he thought he was dreaming, and he went to push the animal away. But, he found out, his hands were tied behind his back. Then, he also found out he wasn't dreaming—a dog was really licking his face.

"Go away, pooch," he mumbled.

But the dog's tongue, damp and rough, still kept on licking. He moved his head from side to side but the dog's tongue followed him. He felt sleepy despite the cold and he had a hard time keeping awake until he started wondering where he was. That thought brought him hurriedly awake.

"Beat it, dog!" he ordered gruffly.

The dog stopped licking him. Bill found that he was sitting against a wall. He was in a room—no, he was in a cellar, because the wall was of earth. The gloom was heavy and he sat and tried to look about him.

He heard a voice say, "You come to, yet, Bill?"

Bill said, "That you, Butch?"

"Sure is, Bill. I figgered you'd come after me."

The voice came from across the darkness. "Where you at, Butch?"

"We're in a cellar, Bill. Jes' set still for a while an' then your eyes'll get used to the darkness an' you can see. I can see good."

"How long you been here, Butch?"

"I dunno, Bill. Always this dark down here so a body can't tell whether it's night or day. Been a long time though. They

jumped me the first day I come into camp an' stuck me in this hole."

"You're a damned fool," stated Bill Wilson.

"How'd you account fer that logic?"

"Nobody but a fool would have a job like your'n of goin' out into the snow on foot or in saddle-crazy canoe an' hunt up gents stealin' furs off'n protected critters like beavers. An' nobody but a fool'd stay in these danged mountains with all this snow an' these blizzards an' all this cold weather!"

"You like the cow-country better, huh?"

"I sure do."

"Been thinkin' some of chuckin' this job an' hittin' back to the saddle-country, but I don't know. This country has some things that you don't have in the cow country."

"Like what, fer instance?"

"The squaws."

Bill tried to snort but that hurt his head. "You had a squaw over in Poplar," he declared. "You was cowboyin' then, wasn't you?"

"But that was a Gros Ventre squaw, Bill. You oughta see my Blackfoot squaw. Purtier'n a young doe deer durin' matin' season."

"For a grown man—ah, hell, what we talkin' this way for?"

"Seareh me."

Bill's eyes were accustomed to the darkness now, and he could see Butch Wade. Wade's hands were tied, too, and he was across the dugout from Bill. Bill could make out the dogs, too.

He sat and looked at the dogs and waited for his aching head to clear. Never before had he seen dogs that looked like these. They were very short legged and they had broad, heavy chests. They were built low and compact and their long shaggy fur was clogged with mud and cockleburrs. They sat and looked at him with dull stupid eyes.

"What kinda dogs are these, Wade?"

"I dunno, Bill. Must be some kinda crossbreed though, I reckon."

"What'd they use them for?"

"Trapping beaver."

"Trappin' beaver?" asked Bill. "That don't make sense."

"Oh yes, it does." Butch Wade explained, and Bill nodded. "So that's the way they do it, huh?" asked Bill.

"That's the way they're trappin' these beaver, Bill."

Bill said, "Wonder if I can break loose." He struggled with his bonds but he was tied with thin rawhide strips, and they cut his wrists. He gave up. "Who put me in this dugout, Wade?"

"Pop Martin an' Jed Balsam. I heered them talkin'. Jed seen you sneak into camp, so he figured he'd knock you out an' make you prisoner. He was mentionin' somethin' about Frenchy LaQuist. Talked like Frenchy'd got lost or somethin'."

Bill grinned and told Butch Wade how he had slugged Frenchy. The sound of boots on the snow outside broke his conversation short. The boots came down the runway leading to the cellar door and the door was opened.

JED BALSAM entered. Bill recognized the beaver-poacher immediately from descriptions given him by people he had met who knew Balsam. This Balsam was a heavy-set man of medium height. He wore regular trapper garb—hobnailed boots, heavy woolen pants, a muskrat cap and a dirty black mackinaw. His face was big and square, and he had a short black beard.

Fenchy LaQuist followed Jed Balsam inside. LaQuist's head was swollen, and he scowled at Bill. Bill grinned and answered the 'breed's scowl.

"How'd you get loose and get here, LaQuist?"

LaQuist snapped, "None of your business!"

Bill spoke to Balsam. "You fin' that houn' dog of your'n"—he gestured at LaQuist—"an' cut him loose?"

"That's right, feller."

"You must be hard up for a sidekick," said Bill.

LaQuist swore and started toward Bill, aiming to kick him. Balsam's heavy voice stopped him "Forgit that, Frenchy!"

"I'll keel"—

"You're about the type that'd kick a tied-up man," said Bill.

"Shut up—both of you," ordered Jed Balsam.

Another man—a lanky, swarthy man—stood behind Balsam. Bill heard Balsam call this man Pop. Another man, called Mike, stood in the doorway. They were both hard-cased trappers.

Jed Balsam said, "Catch the dogs, men."

Pop and LaQuist started catching the growling, snapping dogs. Each dog had a collar with a ring and they attached a buckskin thong to each dog. Bill watched them and wondered. Plainly, something was up.

All of them packed their snowshoes on their backs. They were ready for the trail, Bill reasoned.

"What's up?" he asked.

Balsam answered. "We're leavin' Montana tonight. It's only about twenty miles to the Canadian line."

"Takin' your beaver furs with you?"

"Do I look crazy enough to leave them?" snarled Balsam.

"You don't look any too smart," said Bill.

Balsam said flatly, "You're tongue'll get you killed some day, cowboy."

"It'll be me that gets killed," grinned Bill.

Butch Wade spoke. "What about us two?" he asked. "You sure ain't goin' leave us to die in this hole with out han's tied?"

Jed Balsam did not answer. Frenchy LaQuist was after a dog and could not catch him because the animal hid in a dark corner. Frenchy lit a kerosene lamp that hung from a bracket on the wall. The yellow rays showed the dugout's interior clearly. And for the first time, Bill got a good look at Butch Wade.

Butch Wade's cheeks were sunken and his eyes were tired-looking. A stubble of gray-flecked beard covered his jaws.

"See you in hell," said Frenchy LaQuist. Then he and Pop were dragging out the fighting, snapping dogs. Jed Balsam, who followed them out, stopped in the doorway and spoke to Mike.

"You know your orders, fella?"

Mike said, "You an' Frenchy an' Pop clean out the beaver on South Fork crick. Then you take the pelts you get there an' the ones you got outside an' you cross the Line into Canady. I watch these gents until tomorrow night when I turns 'em loose without grub or guns an' then I go into Canady. I meet you three at"—

Balsam interrupted. "Don't let these gents know where we meet you," he said surlily. "Okay, Mike."

They went outside. The heavy plank door slammed behind them. Bill heard a bolt slide into place. Their footsteps gradually died in the distance.

"Only three men walked away from here," said Butch Wade.

Bill said, "That means they left Mike behind, huh?"

"That's what I'd say, Bill."

"They left the lamp lit too," said Bill. He sat and squinted at the lamp and cursed the cold. "I got an idea, Wade."

BILL got to his feet. His knees were shaky and he almost fell down, but he righted himself in time. He walked over to the lamp and looked up at it.

"Wish I could reach it, Butch."

"What'd you do with it?"

"Burn these rawhide strings on my wrists."

Butch Wade got to his feet and stood beside him "But that'd sure burn hell outa a man's wrists," he stated. "My wrists are plumb worn raw now." He added, "But if'n we can do it, let's go ahead. But how we goin' reach that lamp?"

"This way," said Bill. He stood face to the wall under the lamp. "Now step on the thongs aroun' my wrist."

"Okay," said Butch Wade.

Butch Wade stepped up, placing his foot between the V made by Bill's arms. His weight made the thongs cut deep into Bill's wrists, but Bill bit his lip and held back the pain.

But it was hard for Wade to reach the lamp, because his hands were tied too. He got turned around, reaching out, he got the lamp, took it from its bracket. Bill Wilson was sweating when he slowly lowered Wade —and the lamp—to the floor.

With the lamp on the floor, Bill removed the hot, sooty chimney. Then, his back to the flickering yellow flame, he squatted and placed his wrists over the burning wick. He strained at the buckskin thongs. Hot tongues of fire licked at his wrists. Butch Wade squatted and watched.

"Move a little to the right, Bill."

Bill did not answer, he could not. The pain was too terrible. He closed his eyes and bowed his head, his teeth clenched. Gradually, the thongs burned through. One parted; then another. Suddenly, he was free.

Bill untied Butch Wade's hands. The game-warden's wrists were cut and the

thongs were caked with dried blood. Butch Wade moved his stiff fingers gingerly.

"What about this Mike gent, Bill?"

Bill extinguished the lamp and, holding the heavy glass bowl, he sidled against the wall beside the closed door. He held the lamp like a club over his head.

"Now call for Mike, Butch."

"Oh, Mike," hollered Butch Wade. "Hey, Mike."

Mike's voice came through the heavy door. "What'd you want?"

"How about some grub?"

"T'hell with you," said Mike. "Stay hungry."

"This rawhide is cuttin' my wrists, fella."

"Let it cut 'em."

Butch Wade looked at Bill. "Try again," whispered Bill.

"The lamp done fell off'n the wall, Mike," hollered Butch Wade. "The bowl broke an' the kerosene's a-catchin' a fire!"

The door opened slowly and Mike's head came slowly inside. Plainly, he sensed some trap. He did not see Bill against the dark wall. Bill waited until Mike's head was inside. He struck.

The lamp smacked across the head and Mike toppled forward on his face, knocked cold.

Butch Wade said, "Nice work, Bill."

Bill looked at the lamp. It had not broken. "Sure must be made outa thick glass," he said. He shifted his cold feet. "Any man that'd live in a country this col'—"

"Shut up!" snapped Wade. "We gotta stop Balsam from gettin' away."

"Why stop him?"

"He's got them beaver furs."

"Let 'im have 'em," said Bill. "You're free, ain't you? Here I risk my neck to free you an' you want me to get into more trouble."

"I'll go alone then."

"An' get in more trouble," said Bill. "If you're goin', I reckon I'll have to trail along, 'cause if'n I don't, you're liable to get killed. Or I'll have to go out an' make a fool outa myself while I fin' you again."

Butch Wade put one knee on the unconscious guard's back, pulled the man's hands behind him, raised his feet and tied him hand-and-foot with the thong Bill had taken from his wrists. Then he pulled the guard's gunbelt and .45 Colts loose and started after Bill, who already was going into the night carrying the guard's Winchester .30-30.

"South Fork crick, Bill."

"Where's that at?"

"Foller me."

THE snow was deep and made walking difficult. And Butch Wade was not any too strong. He puffed and panted and wallowed ahead with Bill following. Finally the moon came up.

It showed the mountains clearly—the pine trees bulking dark against the rocky snow-clad slopes. They crossed a wind-swept ravine and came down into a long sloping valley.

"South Fork," said Butch Wade.

"Where'll Balsam an' his gang be at?"

"Aroun' the beaver dam, I reckon."

Moving silently through the snow, they got down-wind from the Balsam dogs, and finally they squatted in the buckbrush, fifty feet from the beaver dam. It was a big dam and it held back a lot of water.

Nevertheless, because of the sharp pitch of the land, the water still flowed rapidly, despite the dam. The creek was frozen in about ten feet from each bank but the center of the stream was open water.

The dam, made of logs and mud, stretched like a black ribbon across the moonlit creek. Balsam and LaQuist and Pop were standing on the dam. The dogs were tied to trees some distance away. They were pulling on their leashes and whimpering

Bill heard Balsam ask, "All set, Pop?"

"It's ready to go, Balsam."

Balsam and LaQuist turned and walked rapidly toward the shore. Pop squatted and lit a match and then ran to where his cronies waited. Bill heard a roar and saw the center of the dam get blown sky-high.

"Dynamite, Butch."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," said Butch. "This is the slickest way to get beaver I ever did see."

The creek water roared through the hole in the dam. The water receded rapidly and the shore ice caved in. The ice broke into chunks and floated down-stream Soon the banks stood naked and ugly and still the water kept going down. Finally, it reached its lowest level.

A beaver builds the entrance to his den a few feet below water-level. Now, with the water-level so low, the entrances were

above the stream. They were dark, sloppy holes set in the muddy bank.

"Now here's where the dogs come in," muttered Butch Wade.

Bill saw the men lead the dogs to the entrances. The dogs, because of their smallness and low-build, could enter the dens easily. With them in the dens, the beavers could not run out and attempt to escape.

Bill could hear the dogs barking in the earth, their barks muffled and sounding distant. That meant that the beavers were cornered in their dens. That showed Balsam and LaQuist and Pop where the end of the dens were at in the earth.

The three beaver poachers started digging with picks and shovels. They all three worked on the same hole. Their shovels pried loose the frozen soil.

A beaver digs his hole at an angle slightly upward in a bank, therefore his den is not far under the ground. Bill heard an animal squeal, and saw Balsam whack down suddenly with the broad side of his shovel. He stepped out of the hole, toting a dead beaver by its broad tail.

"Another fifty bucks in Canady, men," he said.

Bill's feet were cold. He shifted positions. "I'll circle 'em an come in from behin' 'em, Butch. You stay here and when I step outa the brush, you come out too. Thataway we'll have 'em penned between us."

Unnoticed, Bill moved silently through the brush and, when he was behind the three trappers, he stepped out, his rifle raised.

"Put up your hands!"

The three turned sharply, stared at him. LaQuist spoke first. "Bill Wilson," he said huskily.

A voice came from behind them. "An' Butch Wade, too."

Balsam said, "They've trapped us!" His swarthy face was the color of yellow buckskin. There was a moment of silence. Bill saw LaQuist look at his rifle, braced against a tree ten feet away. Pop's eyes were livid with fright.

LAQUIST broke the silence. He ran for his rifle, scooped it up, and, before he shot, Bill Wilson's rifle spoke. LaQuist dropped his rifle and went down in the snow, coughing horribly.

But already Jed Balsam had drawn his automatic from his belt. He shot once, and, in his haste, he missed Butch Wade, who sent a bullet tunneling through Balsam's heart. Balsam was dead before he hit the ground.

"Don't shoot me!" whooped Pop.

The man raised his hands hurriedly. He stood there, his face white as the moonlight, his eyes round and fearful. Bill almost had to laugh. His rifle covering Pop, he looked at Butch Wade.

"You satisfied now?"

"Sure am," said Wade happily.

"I'm gettin' outa here," said Bill Wilson. "My feet are almost froze off'n me, my hands are plumb numb, an' I'm spittin' icicles."

"But how about these men—these prisoners?"

Bill grinned. "That's your lookout, Butch. I done what I claimed I'd do—go out an' look you up an' get you outa this tight. If you're crazy enough to wanta stick aroun' this col' country, have at it fella."

Butch Wade said, "How about a bottle."

"A bottle of what?"

"Ol' Mister Oak."

Bill smiled "I might stay—for that," he said.

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By HARRY F. OLMSTEAD

Once, Lightnin', Shotgun and Ben had ridden the owlhoot. Now Ben lay murdered, and his partners rode the gun-swift trail again—a United States Marshal and an outlaw carrying hot lead to a trail-mask gang.

STOCKY, icy-eyed little Lighton N. Rodd, U. S. Marshal from Cheyenne, was jogging into the badlands near the head of Frenchman's Creek. He rode north toward the border by way of Frenchman's Ford. Heavy fall rains had raised all the creeks and he found plenty of swimmin' water through which he had to force his muddy jaded horse, pausing now and then to rest the animal.

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The Vulture crumpled backward from Lightnin's smashing fist.

Now, with the short October day waning, he was ten miles short of his destination: old Ben Halleck's place on the West Fork of Little Rocky Creek. He was in scrub timber, green whispery, gorged with silence. Night was reaching out of the Wood Mountains, flinging spectral patterns over the darkening gray slopes.

Slouched in the saddle, apparently more than half asleep, Lightnin' Rodd urged his weary mount up the coulee trail that led to Halleck's. Yet the practiced wariness that had ordered his life was unallayed. Else he would not have heeded a tugging uneasiness that bespoke immediate danger.

Imperceptibly he straightened, tensed. Little tremors chased themselves up his spine as something, vaguely forming in the trail ahead, stirred warningly.

The horse blew a warning blast through its nostrils and the lawman peered coldly between its forward-flung ears. Twilight was guttering out as night flung back the last lingering sun rays. And Lightnin's holster guns were suddenly heavy, comforting, at his thighs. He stirred his half-unwilling horse with the spurs. A gun glittered and a voice, cold, commanding, spoke from the gloom. . . .

"Reach!" it spat. "And don't git nutty notions what to reach for!"

Never one to deliberately defy a drop, he obeyed. Stiff as frozen leather, Lightnin' laughed easily, his hands shoulder high. Yet such was his paradoxical nature that he could laugh and kill at the same time.

"What yuh want me tuh do?" he flung at the waiting gunman.

"Come on down an' plant yore feet on the ground," grunted the one ahead.

WITHOUT protest, Lightnin' stepped down, stood tense, ready, as the man broke brush and strode toward him. Now, face to face in the dying light, they stared curiously at each other. And both recoiled.

"Shotgun!" rapped the lawman. "I shore never expected to meet up with you in this uncurried neck uh hell."

Shotgun Galt, wanted in six States for horse stealing, train robbery, cattle rustling and homicide, searched Lightnin's eyes. Then he grunted, laughed uneasily, and pouched his gun with a *chock*.

"Not lookin' for me, eh? Well, much as I hate a tinbadge, I'm takin' yore word at face value, Lightnin'. I'm on a visit to ol' Ben Halleck. What fetches you?"

"A little uh the same, Shotgun. An' I'd be there right now except for a hul lot uh swimmin' water an' buildin' up fires to dry out."

"Good!" exclaimed the outlaw. "Then I'll ride along with you. I've jest come from ol' Ben's but I'd admire to go back. Don't know of anybody I'd rather take there now than Lightnin' Rodd. C'mon!"

Some bitter note in Shotgun's voice made the lawman look after him with an unasked question in his eyes. Something undefinable in the man's manner. Something wrong. Lightnin' shrugged. Whatever it was, Shotgun would out with it in his own good time. It was easy to understand his willingness to ride back to Halleck's after just leaving there. The three of them had borne arms together, fighting with the cowmen in the Johnson County War. Galt and Halleck had been outlawed for their pains. Lightnin', by a twist of fate, had become a U. S. Marshal.

Embittered by the injustice done him in that unsatisfactorily settled trouble, Shotgun had cast his lot with the followers of the owlhoot trail. And so often had he swallowed lead that Kid Curry said of him, "—an' for Judas' sake don't squeeze that feller. A shade too much pressure an' he'll squirt lead like a shotgun." And so they dubbed him Shotgun. The name stuck. And so did the reputation.

Ben Halleck, with a wife and growing family to think about, slipped across the Montana line, locating in the untracked wilds of Little Rocky Creek. It had been a wise move. For twelve years he had been unmolested by the law. Now, with the coming of the first lawman to his ranch, it looked like a reunion.

Stirrup to stirrup, Lightnin' and Shotgun urged their horses toward Halleck's. Silently. Moodily. Whatever lay on Shotgun's mind was taboo between them. Lightnin', never loquacious, was content to remain silent, charging the outlaw's reticence to the fact that he had undoubtedly been with Butch Cassiday in the Green River train job so recently pulled off. After such a job, the outlaws frequently scattered. And what better place to lose one's

self than in this inhospitable corner of Montana?

The moon rose, blood-red above a jagged horizon, and paled to silver as it climbed toward the zenith, flooding blind coulees and half-timbered, finger-like ridges with a chill and sinister light. Now the horses toiled up a steep twisting trail and plunged out atop a bare ridge, panting heavily with the effort. Shotgun, slightly in the lead, reined in. Lightnin' pulled up beside him. Their eyes swept downward to a normally lovely spot. Damnation Flats—so called to commemorate the ill fate of a wagon train, trapped there by the Ogallalahs in gold-rush days.

SHOTGUN swung a grinning mask to Lightnin', chuckling mirthlessly at the lawman's reaction. In the center of a tree-bordered flat glowed sinister red eyes, brightening and waning in the gusts of a fitful breeze. Upward through the moon-fog, slender spirals of smoke curled into the cold night air. Heat waves, rising off beds of livid coals, shimmered like the belly of a jester. Not one of the several log buildings that had graced the Halleck ranch was standing.

"Great God!" exclaimed the lawman, and it was more a horror-filled prayer than a curse. "They've burned out ol' Ben!"

"Yeah!" snarled the outlaw acridly. "Burned him out."

"You—you was here an' . . .?" Lightnin's eye was condemning.

"Whoa!" protested Shotgun. "I didn't say so. I said I'd been here. I got here too late. Shall we go down to see ol' Ben?"

Their eyes met, locked. The outlaw's stained teeth were bared in a soundless snarl. On the lips of the little deputy from Cheyenne was the cold smile that knowing ones had come to fear far more than his frown. His eyes, clearing of their horror-flood, became hot pockets of rage. His hand strayed instinctively to his holster.

"We'll go down," he said huskily. "Ol' Ben Halleck was my friend."

"An' mine, Lightnin'," stated the outlaw stiffly. "Fellers that done this better be hard to ketch."

"I reckon," drawled the lawman, and there was a sharp sword of vengeance in his tone.

He led the way down the slant toward the ruin. And what he found on Damnation Flats wasn't nice.

At the edge of the bed of coals marking the main ruin lay a scorched huddle of what had once been a man. Within the fire itself gleamed an unmistakable pile of human bones. Down by the well lay the bullet-riddled shape of Bud Halleck, aged ten, his fingers rigid about the barrel of a long Sharp's rifle. At the corral gate, where he had dropped while trying to get a horse, lay Tom Halleck, ol' Ben's oldest boy.

It looked like a wipeout, unless . . . Lightnin's lips drew down to a thin tight line. He hated to think too much about ol' Ben's women folks. True, they, too, might be cooking in one of these pyres. But then again, they might be . . .

Until the eastern sky gave promise of the dawn, Lightnin' and Shotgun toiled. Digging a big grave to bury the dead. Strange obsequies. A lawman and an outlaw lowering broken and burned bodies into the ground. Without shroud, coffin or benefit of clergy.

They were resting in the dawn light, enjoying well-earned smokes, when Shotgun Galt started. He was lying with his head on his arm, but suddenly sat bolt upright, listening, peering into the mists to the north.

"What is it, Shotgun?"

'Hawsses!" whispered the outlaw hoarsely. "I shore hope it's them killin' snakes comin' back." And his hand snapped to his gun.

II

LIGHTNIN' came to his feet, his gun sliding into his fingers as he led the way to cover. Now two riders materialized, cantering easily down the flats, a loaded pack horse lumbering along behind. At sight of the smoldering piles where had once stood the neat buildings of Halleck's ranch, the pair drew rein, staring suspiciously, muttering between themselves. From his covert, Lightnin' Rodd cursed softly.

"No such luck, Shotgun," he spat. "We don't heat iron this mornin'. That's a Mountie!"

Which was no news at all, because the

red coat of Canadian authority loomed in the wan light like a lighthouse in a fog. With Shotgun right at his elbow, Lightnin' stepped out into the open. Seeing them, the two horsemen spurred ahead.

"H'are yuh, Redcoat!" sang out Lightnin'. "Lookin' for Canada down thisaway?"

The Mountie swung down, chuckling. His serious face showed no trace of mirth, however, as he drew his gloves and spread cold-stiffened fingers to the coals.

"Canada? Scarcely, old top. Sergeant Rolfe is the name, sirs. Ba'tise and I have looked forward to the Hallecks' fire to warm our bones. But hardly so much of a blaze, eh?"

"Lighton N. Rodd, U. S. Marshal's office! And Bill Galt, my guide."

The two lawmen shook hands soberly. The redcoat studied the ruins in the growing light.

"Deucedly fast work for a marshal to get here before the bally smoke has settled, Rodd."

Lightnin' met his keen glance. "Nothing official about my visit, Sergeant. Galt and I are old friends uh Ben Halleck's. We got here too late."

"Come now, old fellow," the Mountie lifted his brows. "You don't mean that Ben Halleck and his whole family . . .?"

He paused, checked by some look in the little marshal's eyes. Lightnin' gestured toward the fresh mound of earth. "Ben's oldest and youngest boy are in there. And another body, too bad burned to tell. Still another in the fire yonder an' mebbyso more. I'm rather glad you've come. Mebby you kin he'p us unravel this."

"It's a beastly shock," breathed Rolfe softly, "after what we've just been through. The Old Man sent Ba'tise and me in search for Constable Tate, missing these three months. No sign of him have we found—no word. Only a broken trail that led us finally to the Halleck Mine in the Porcupine Hills. We found no one at the mine and stayed the night. Just at sunrise, as we were starting to pack, a man tumbled down the trail."

"Tate?" asked Lightnin', and a strange excitement seemed to have gripped him.

"No, thank God," said the Mountie fervently. "I said it was a man. Ha! The poor chap may have been a man once. But when he fell over into Ba'tise's arms, he was scarcely a shell. We put him to bed and fed him a tot of rum. And the story he told us would put an iron man in a blue funk, eh, Ba'tise?"

The breed tracker, who had finished making a swift survey of trail sign about the ruins, joined the group hunkering at the edge of the fire.

"Oui," he said stolidly. "Dat faller, she tall de trut', you bat me my life. He's planty seeck an' know he's gonna die mebby. So he's tell it right. Ba'tise knows."

The redcoat nodded, fished a package of imported cigarets from his tunic.

"Smoke, men?"

WHEN they had each extracted one of the slender, cork-tipped tubes and lit them, Rolfe continued his narrative.

"This broken man was young Ben Halleck. It seems he was taken from the mine two months ago, along with the cleanup of the riffles. His family, I have reason to believe, felt that he had run away with the bleedin' gold. But according to his yarn he was taken to a town over near the Whiskey Buttes—a place called Trigger."

'A town near Whiskey Buttes?" echoed Lightnin'. "Trigger? Somebody's crazy. They ain't a town within sixty mile uh Whiskey Buttes."

"Righto!" said the Mountie. "So we all believed. And that made it easy for a dirty bleedin' blighter to play his filthy game. The Old Man has known for a long time that there was a smuggling leak along the Border near here. He believed it was down the White Mud River. I've already proved that to be wrong. It's somewhere through the Wood Mountains and into this town of Trigger."

"Smuggling what?" from Lightnin'.

"Cocaine!" snapped the sergeant of the Northwest Mounted. "Coming in from Hudson by underground. Perhaps from Port Nelson."

"Who?" commenced the marshal, and the redcoat laughed.

"Of course. Who? Who else but the Vulture, a vile beast who had played hob with the Force for years around Belly River and Lake of the Woods. We thought him dead two years ago. In fact, a reliable Slavi trapper brought us word that

he had recognized the body, badly eaten by wolves, and buried it. The Vulture. Gad, what a man to cope with! A savage and thoroughly vicious scoundrel, Rodd, and smart—devilishly smart."

As he talked, the Mountie kept his eyes riveted on Shotgun Galt. Under the intent gaze, the outlaw became restive, squirmed uneasily.

"There's a town uh Trigger, Lightnin'," he blurted out. "An' it's somewhere near the Poplar River. I've heard it talked by—er—around campfires."

'You have?" said the Mountie. "And your name is Galt, eh? Not Shotgun Galt, by any chance?"

Shotgun bounded to his feet, his face flaming, his hand too close to his gun. A hot retort boiled to his lips and reckless blood pulsed at his throat. Before he could fling his fighting answer, the little lawman from Cheyenne took the play.

"Set down, Galt," he ordered harshly, then turned to the redcoat. "I wouldn't mention that again, Sergeant, if I was you. Shotgun Galt is a wanted man with a price on his head. Bill Galt here is working *with* the law. You was talking about young Ben Halleck. Is he dead?"

Sergeant Rolfe nodded grimly. "Dead, and buried at the mine. And what a death! Loaded with the bleedin' white crystals of death for two months and then turned loose as a warning to his kinsmen."

"Sounds crazy," commented Lightnin' sourly. "What would be the idee?"

" 'Tis his way," said the Mountie. "Control by fear-sway. It seems he ordered the Hallecks out of this region, just as he once ordered the trappers out of the Belly River Basin. The Hallecks defied him, and this—" he swept his hand in a bitter circling gesture, "—this is the answer of a stinkin', black-hearted wretch!"

SHOTGUN GALT breathed a curse, flipped away his cigaret.

"If the redcoat tells 'er right, Lightnin', it's a bet that Ben's gal Dakota never cooked in these fires."

"The Vulture," said the Mountie stiffly, "is said to lay heavy hands on his women where he finds them, break them to his will, then barter their broken, drug-shocked bodies to honka-tonk keepers, who are outlets for his drug trade. Pleasant little playmate, this murdering Vulture, wot?"

"A damn hog-hocked, gall-sored, spur-striped hunk uh hell," swore Shotgun fervently.

But Lighton N. Rodd was smiling, a smile as bleak and chill as the cheerlessness of his heart.

"Not a chance that Dakota Halleck died in these fires," he growled. "By the way, Sergeant, how yuh fixed fer these cigarets? I lost my makin's swimmin' Poplar River an' I'd admire to buy two, three packs."

"Not at all, old fellow," replied the Briton. "I never sell fags. But I carry a case with me and it'll be a pleasure to supply you." He got up, rummaged beneath the tarpaulin of his pack, tossed the marshal two packages.

"Thanks," nodded Lightnin'. "Go on with yore story, Sergeant."

"That's about all of the yarn, Rodd. Except that I've got a bit of a stake myself in that town of Trigger."

"Such as what?"

"According to young Ben Halleck," said the redcoat, "the Vulture's holding my bunkie, Constable Tommy Tate. Feeding him dope to cure him of the habit of living. Killing him by inches with intravenous shots of cocaine until he's a broken, shaken wreck who cries piteously for poison to salve his pain. It's beastly, Marshal Rodd, and I'm going to Trigger if only to lay down these poor bones of mine. In case you haven't anything more important to do . . ."

"Of course," Rodd said, smiling that frigid smile. "It would be very strange if your Tommy Tate wasn't my friend Tommy Tate of Chinook, who used to dream of joining the redcoats of Canada."

"The same, sir," confirmed Rolfe. "And salt of the earth."

Lightnin' nodded. "Then it looks like I've got a bone or two to pick with this Vulture in Trigger. Now here . . ."

And for a long time they squatted there on the violated floor of Damnation Flats, smoking and making their plans.

III

WITH Sergeant Rolfe and Ba'tise already in the saddle, Lightnin' fell in beside Shotgun Galt, spoke from the corner of his mouth. . . .

"Are you wanted in the Northwest Territories too?"

Shotgun nodded.

"Fer brainin' a breed in Fort Walsh an' skippin' with his roll," he muttered shamefacedly. "We was drunk an' playin' some jackpots. I knocks this Canuck over fer a hundred iron men an' the walloper calls me a son of a she kioat. I never took that fightin' name offa nobody yet. The polecat drawed a skinnin' knife on me an' started to peel off my hide. I hits him with the table, sorta splatterin' his brains, grabs up his roll an' hits fer the Border like heel flies was on my tail. I ain't been back since."

He shook his head dolefully.

"Don't go back," advised Lightnin'. It was an old, old story to him. Wild, hard-case youngsters outlawed because of courage and a tigerish willingness to fight for what they believed to be their inalienable rights: justice, freedom, fair play. "Stay outa Canada, Shotgun. This redcoat's got yuh pegged an' he'll iron yuh quick as look at yuh."

The outlaw chuckled. "I ain't lost nothin' in Canada. I'm a-throwin' my irons in with yore'n on this Trigger deal."

Lightnin' shook his head. "That's just the point, Shotgun. You mind I'm goin' to the Halleck Mine to pick up young Ben's trail an' backtrack it. The mine's in Canada. Nope. You tag along with Rolfe an' the breed, follerin' along the sign uh the snakes that done these killin's. Mebby it'll lead yuh to the Vulture, in which case we'll meet in Trigger. If not, then we'll meet in Trigger anyway, per plan. If Dakota's in that hell-town we gotta git her out. An' as fer Tommy Tate . . ."

Lips compressed, Lightnin' swung into the saddle. Shotgun nodded agreement, swallowing his disappointment. In his heart he knew Lightnin' was right, knew also there was little chance to sway the little marshal from the purposes deep-stamped upon his indomitable will.

"So long," Shotgun said.

Now Lighton N. Rodd wheeled his horse, jabbed in the spurs, breaking into a swift lope to the north. Without a nod or a word to the other three. It was his way. In him was no sentiment when he took a man trail. He was a cold, wolverine-like man-hunter on the trail of a human brute calling himself the Vulture.

LIGHTNIN'S big bay horse bore him steadily northward along the well-worn trail used by the Hallecks on trips between their mine and their home. Four hours out of Damnation Flats, he crossed a low timbered ridge and headed down into a sheltered depression where lay the log buildings of the Halleck Mine.

The place was eerily silent, abandoned. And Lightnin's wary eyes were fixed upon an earth mound, freshly thrown up, in the dooryard of the largest cabin.

"Young Ben," he muttered savagely. "What a chance did that boy have in life? Humph! Food for a buzzard at twenty-four."

Jays racketed at his intrusion as he swung down to read sign. Plain in the dooryard were the flat heel-prints of Sergeant Rolfe's field boots and of Ba'tise's moccasins. But apparently nothing else fresh. Lightnin' commenced swinging circles. Where the trail dipped off the headland he found what he sought—the marks of cowboy boots with the heels run over from walking in rough country.

He backtracked that plain sign a way, then returned to the cabin, satisfied he had found the last trail of young Ben Halleck. Loosing the cinch, he tied the horse in the barn and forked it down a manger of sweet bluestem hay. Long without food himself, he jerked the latch string, entered the house. The table was littered with food, soiled and fly-scourged tin plates. The bunks were in utter disarray, as if the place had been deserted during the morning meal. But that was all—no sign of fight or anything.

There was flour and bacon and coffee available and the lawman took time to build up a fire, set food to cooking, then to satisfy his hunger. While he ate, his eyes flicked from time to time to a cartridge-like box of fulminate blasting caps in the center of the table. And after he had finished, he sat for a long time staring at those caps as if they held for him a peculiar fascination.

Now he drew out a package of the cigarets the Mountie had given him, stabbed one in his mouth, thumbed a light. His mind leaped far ahead to his entry into

Trigger town. Framing situations and counter-situations, based upon his long experience in dealing with desperate men. His fighting smile hardened, rather than softened, his homely visage.

Very deliberately he laid down a fulminate cap, placed a cigaret beside it, studied them intently. He chuckled dryly.

The tea kettle was singing on the stove. He got up, crossed the room and steamed the seal from the unopened package. Back at the table, he worked swiftly, carefully, removing tobacco from the ends of slender paper smoking tubes, inserting a nicely fitting copper-jacketed cap in each and then replacing tobacco to conceal the deception.

When the chore was complete, he compared the result with untampered-with cigarets.

Some difference, to be sure, but only to a very discerning eye. Carefully he placed the deadly smoke cylinders in the package, steamed the stamp, resealed it. Rolling a small bundle of food, he was ready to ride.

IT was slow going, tracking the rambling course of a fast-weakening boy who had all but died on his feet. But Lightnin' hung grimly to the track, finding, near sunset, the carcass of Ben Halleck's horse where it had mired at the margin of the West Fork of Poplar River. Crossing the stream, the lawman climbed the long flat slope with Ben Halleck's trail plain as a printed page before him.

Dusk caught him on the height of land between the West and North Forks of Poplar. Studying the well-traveled trail that came in suddenly from the north. A haze was over the land, yet from the eminence the lawman could view a tumbled expanse of hill and prairie. South lay the coulee-cut heading of Porcupine. Yonder reared the twin domes of Whiskey Buttes. East, north and west swung the imposing half moon of the Wood Mountains, with their inviting cleavage, known as Old Wives Pass, drawing this new trail like the bow does an arrow.

Lightnin' reined off trail to a little group of trees, drew saddle and built up a small fire. The matter of this well-beaten trail needed thought. Undoubtedly Ben Halleck had traveled it, though subsequent traffic had erased the sign. Should it perchance lead to Trigger, Lightnin' stood a good chance in following it of being hemmed between two fires—ahead and behind.

Broiling bacon and studying the several angles of his problem, the little lawman was startled by the drumming of hoofs. Lightnin' shifted position so that his back was against a scrubby pine tree, hitching his guns as he moved. His mind buzzed with a quick presentiment of impending danger. His eyes, apparently on his toasting bacon, were really lancing the gloom out of which two horsemen materialized, heading directly for the fire.

Yard by yard the foreground narrowed, revealing details. Leggy horses . . . a tall rider, gaudily dressed, bestriding an ornate silver-mounted saddle . . . his undersized companion, who was plainly scrub stock . . . four guns in cutaway holsters, tied low and well forward.

The tall man, face shaded by an enormous hat, swung down, clumped stiffly into the fireglow, followed in every move by his slinking rat-like companion. Lightnin' chuckled to himself. It was like a she bear and her yearlin' cub. Or maybe more like a shorthorn cow and a calf.

"Howdy, gents," he called out. "Just in time fer chow, such as she is."

"Thanks," said the big man, in a flat, even tone. "We won't bother yuh. Headin' whichaway?"

Lightnin' turned his bacon. "I was jest settin' here, augerin' that matter when you rode up. North an' west is out, them bein' plumb onfriendly climates fer my kinda health. So it's south or east."

The tall rider hunkered down, tossing a red-hot coal carelessly in his palm. The innocent act was indicative of his toughness and Lightnin' was impressed. Here was a man of powerful physique, sturdy of limb, broad of back, long of arm and muscled like a cougar. The lawman tried covertly to glimpse his face but the man kept it well hidden.

"As one man to another," the tall one hummed, "that east trail ain't so good. It taps a country controlled by a rough set that shoot first and argue afterward."

"East or south," murmured Lightnin', as if he hadn't heard. "Heads I go south, tails I go east."

He tossed a coin. Tails showed.

"East!" the lawman grinned at them.

THEY looked at each other, and the tall man removed his hat for a second to scratch his graying temple. That move was enough to give Lightnin' the glimpse he wanted. And suddenly his face wore that chill grin that should have warned this pair, but of course didn't.

The big man was the Vulture. He was arrayed in a black coat that matched the buzzard's foul pinions. At his thick throat was a red silk bandana, like the crimson wattles of the stink-bird. His long, almost bald head was wrinkled, seamed. Small beady eyes, set on either side of a predatory nose, leerd from bneath a loose browles forehead. The Vulture. Well named. A nerveless creature, sinister and powerful, who found ecstasy in appalling cruelty.

Lightnin' shuddered. Then his rage ran up the scale. He forced it down. Some small inner voice warned him he would need all he had of courage, speed, coolness to match this pair.

The Vulture rose to his full height. "That coin stall," he snarled, "don't fool anybody. I had you measured at first glance and I never misjudge a man. You're on the east trail for a reason and don't propose to be jarred off. Why?"

"That's my business," snapped Lightnin', with fire.

"And mine," countered the renegade. "Men call me the Vulture, a name that carries weight from Hudson Bay to the Missouri. You may have reasons for traveling east from here but they pale before your reasons for turning south, here and now. I'm not hinting. I'm telling you. Get on the south trail into Porcupine, clear out, keep going, and don't come back!"

"You don't seem to like me, Mister," drawled the marshal. "Why not?"

"Because you're not the type to fit into my plans. Too independent, too strong, too dangerous. I use men. But not your kind. We'd be bound to clash and I was never one to flirt with danger. I tromp it out where I find it, quick or slow, as the spirit moves me. You get out of these badlands—now."

"Vulture-man, Lightnin' never crawled to anything in pants. He's stayin' with the flip uh the coin."

"Lightnin'!" The renegade's belly shook. "Why Lightnin'? You'll find it more showy than dangerous. Mostly a far-away flare in the sky."

"Ever see it knock a gut-eatin' buzzard out of a dead tree?" asked Lightnin' softly.

"Not yet."

"You're goin' to," said the little lawman, and relapsed to silence.

"Interesting," came the amused drawl of the renegade chieftain. "But so be it." Death suddenly blazed in his pit-black orbs as he turned them to the slitted eyes of his gunman. "I've wasted too much time already. Weasel, you stay with Lightnin' and use your persuasion to send him—er—south. I'll see one or the other of you tomorrow. Sometime."

He rose to the saddle, reined his chestnut gelding about, broke it into a swift lope. In a minute the thud of his hoofs had been swallowed in the night-gloomed distance. The two men at the fire sat in morose silence, the Weasel tracing aimless designs in the dust. Lightnin' contemplating his charred bacon.

The little lawman knew now that no matter what concessions he might choose to make in his direction of travel, he was marked for death. And the Weasel had been served the old frontier ultimatum—kill or be killed—by a merciless master.

Flecks of red lit in the lawman's slaty eyes as the killer instinct burned up in his veins. He wasn't afraid but that he could match the Weasel's gun magic. But admitted that at such short range two evenly matched gun throwers must certainly die. And with his nerves taut as a fiddle string, he drove his mind in a solution of his problem.

IV

FOR quite a while the two men sat quietly beside the fire. Then the Weasel stirred restlessly, threw fuel upon the coals without removing his deadly snake-like glance from his intended victim.

"Persuasion," he chortled, in a thin, cracked voice. "Where'll yuh take this here now persuasion, Buzzard-bait?"

"I'm easy pleased, Weasel," grinned the lawman icily. "Mebby if I smoke on it, I kin decide better."

From his pocket he drew a wrinkled

package, extracted a cigaret—the last one by malice aforethought. The Weasel eyed the tube of paper and tobacco hungrily as Lightnin' crumpled the package, flipped it away.

"Tailor mades, eh?" he said ruefully. "Don't happen to have another on yuh?"

"Shorest thing," grunted the lawman, with a calmness he didn't feel. "He'p yoreself. Last smoke for one of us." He flipped the man the unopened pack.

"Last smoke for you, feller," said the killer confidently, as he extracted a smoke and pocketed the pack. "You won't be needin' these never no more. So I hope they's no hard feelin's for me glaumin' 'em."

"None whatever," smiled Lightnin'.

They lit up. Lightnin' slumped back against the tree, his face hidden behind his arm-clasped knees, his heart drumming a swift tattoo. Silence fell. Cigarets ebbed and glowed.

"Shame to kill a fellow what gives a man a good smoke like—"

Boom!

A deafening explosion tore the words from his mouth. A flash of fire obscured his face. The Weasel, blown backward, hit the ground soddenly. Unmoved, his face a mask, Lightnin' darted to the side of the prone man. No doubt as to his fate. His head was all but blown away and Lightnin', used to all manner of grim and violent sights, laid the man's hat over what had once been his face as he reached out the filched cigarets and tucked them in his pocket for further use.

"A fair sample," he droned icily. "Now for a real helpin' of the same."

He searched for and found the empty package he had flipped away. Smoothed it out and placed within it one lone and innocent cigaret as a plant. A moment later, still smiling that iceberg smile, he was in the saddle, spurring along the Vulture's trail.

BLEAK, forbidding, abandoned, the Whiskey Buttes badlands are made to order for the badman. In the long reach between the Big Muddy and the Canadian Line there is no region more wild than this twisted chain of tortured gulches, blind coulees and rocky ridges dotted with scrub pines, quaking asp and brush.

Capital of this friendless waste, Trigger lay a scant ten miles from the Border, was peopled by men gone bronc and had no other excuse for being. Started some years before as a rendezvous for horse thieves, it had grown steadily since the Vulture had ousted the original denizens and taken the place over as headquarters for his ramified criminal operations. A godless town knowing no other law than that promulgated by Colonel Colt and his right hand man—the rope.

Lawmen? They hadn't bothered Trigger town for a number of reasons. Few knew of the town's existence. Some, who by devious routes had come into possession of the true facts, lacked jurisdiction. Others found more pressing demands closer home. Sheriffs, marshals, detectives and Federal officers were baying Butch Cassiday's Wild Ranch, Kid Curry's Hole-in-the Wall gang, and other lawless groups loosed upon Montana after the Johnson County imbroglio. It kept them far too busy to allow interest in rumors of a smuggling nest in the remote northeast corner of Montana.

So Trigger grew unmolested, digested its grim secrets, buried its dead and went about its sinister business. Riding toward that metropolis of hell, came now Lighton N. Rodd, one of the most fearless and indefatigable lawmen the northland ever knew. Following a taboo trail, wrapped in serious thought. . . .

His mind whipped back over his tempestuous past. Texas . . . the migrating buffalo . . . trail herds . . . flaming Dodge City and Wild Bill Hickock. . . . . Montana and a lawbadge. . . . Duels. Trails radiating like spokes to a hub. And at the hub the bestial buzzard face of the one known as the Vulture.

Here was his greatest quest, the mightiest odds he had ever faced. Yet certainty lurked in his mind that he would face the Vulture in showdown. One, maybe both of them, would die. From the first moment he had seen the renegade chieftain, Lightnin' had known that nothing short of the man's violent destruction would satisfy. And the gods that smile at great gambles chortled at the odds faced by this freckled little lawman from Cheyenne.

Lightnin' didn't fear those odds, only that he might not succeed. His pulse beat

cool and steady and in his soul was a grim pleasure that the Vulture was smart, strong, heavy of arm and thick of shoulder. Lightnin' Rodd felt no fear of the man, yet when the moon rose full and red above the tumbled eastern horizon, the lawman wondered if he would ever see it rise again. He patted the neck of his mount.

"This ride, hawss," he spoke aloud, "will stand out as the most interestin' ever I took. Win or lose, it'll shore be a picnic. Git along."

The horse carried him swiftly into a savagely desolate region of parallel coulees and low, scrub-studded ridges, each exactly like the last. Once a horse whinnied up ahead and Lightnin' reined down abruptly, shot his hand to his gun and rode slowly, warily, between straight cutbanks topped by brush. A deadly defile, a natural ambush. With the unholy weight of human eyes upon him and wonder in his mind as to what influence held their hands.

Another time a hoof clicked upon stone. Leather creaked in the night. A bridle jangled. Lightnin's eyes glowed as they drilled the coverts for a foe. His gun had leaped to his hand as he dismounted and his finger was taut on the trigger. But no one showed. And after a seemly wait, the lawman strode stiffly ahead, leading his horse. And again they let him go.

Lightnin' rode on, chuckling. Obviously they were trying to break his nerve. Let them try.

MILES beyond those two alarms came another interlude which found the lawman sitting stiffly in the saddle in the thin gloom of a box elder, breathing fast, tense as a hunting panther. Far off, a coyote bayed the moon and Lightnin' eased warily ahead. Like a shot from the blue a chill laugh stabbed him, a croaking laugh that dripped venom, that echoed like a curse through the silence of the wasteland.

"Yo're headin' right, feller. It's plumb easy to git in but shorely hell to git out!"

Lightnin' essayed no reply as he rode the spurs. But even as a cloud brushes the face of the moon, so did an inner turmoil transform his features with that deadly danger flag, his fighting smile.

"Hawss," he gritted, and the lust to kill was tugging at his vitals, "as long as this Vulture lives, Montana can't know a day of peace or her children a day's insurance against killin' drugs. Longer he goes the bolder he'll git. Not satisfied with breakin' the bodies an' souls uh kids under the age uh discretion, he's wiped out a peaceful family that stood in his path, laid heavy hands on a woman, an' now is grindin' his heel in the face of a helpless redcoat. Them things is only bait for bigger things. The trap is set an' I'm springin' it for better or for worse."

His voice lifted softly over the beat of hoofs. He held a steady pace eastward, the monotonous *clackety-clack* of hoofs echoing hollowly in the night and the creak and jingle of gear making a rhythmical accompaniment. Mile after mile, with the moon lifting to the zenith and dipping westward.

Lightnin' swung with the trail as it cut a long circle to the south. The grade lifted to avoid the uncertainties of a gorge, skirted the dark face of a cliff and eased out on a long ridge. Far below, its lights glittering like evil eyes through the cloak of night, lay Trigger. A strange elation gripped the lawman as he dipped downward. His great fear had been in not being able to get in. Once inside, he'd take his chances on getting out.

Trigger was as silent as a tomb as Lightnin' entered its environs. It was set on a broad bench at the junction of two main forks of the river. The streets were deserted and ominously still.

The lawman drew rein before a huge log building, its two stories towering strangely above its shack-like neighbors. Light streamed from vents in its board-blinded windows. And again the little marshal was conscious of the weight of unfriendly eyes.

Beside the huge edifice squatted a low building that exuded the musty smell of hay and manure. A restless snorting and stomping told that it was a stable. Always solicitous of horse-flesh, Lightnin' slid down, led his mount inside the barn. He drew his hull, stalled the animal, forked down hay and returned to rack his saddle. He straightened, whistling softly. In that short interim, some nimble-fingered renegade had lifted Winchester and scabbard from the saddle.

Lightnin' smiled coldly, walked stiffly out, an undeniable prickling in the small of his back, as if sights were notched there.

Outside again, he shifted his guns handy to the draw and contemplated the frowning front of the great log building. Here, unless he guessed far of the mark, was the aerie of the Vulture.

Lightnin' strode boldly forward, shouldered through the door. He paused, light almost blinding him. A nasty chorus of laughs stung his ears. They were scattered about the room at tables, a score of gimlet-eyed, rat-faced gunmen. A rare lot of breeds, renegades, border-hoppers with their illicit calling deep stamped upon them. Killers.

At the bar, conversing with a cadaverous bartender, lounged a burly bearded character with a short beard and a mop of coal-black hair peeping from beneath his floppy hat.

He looked up when Lightnin' came in.

"Oh-oh!" he chortled. "Look what blew in, boys! Lightnin' out of a clear sky! Pete," he said to the bar menial, "poke up an' tell the chief that Weasel won't be comin' back, never no more."

THE sour-faced barkeeper nodded, hurried through a door. Lightnin' could hear him running upstairs. The room was deadly silent as the little lawman strode forward. All eyes were on him, but he had eyes only for the big bearded customer at the bar. In dozens of lawman offices he had seen that face above a reward notice. It was Hellfire Hogan, wanted a thousand dollars' worth for murdering a family of seven in the Cayuse Hills.

"What's it to be, Lightnin'?" he hummed, sliding behind the bar. "Name yore arsenic. It's on the Vulture an' you've shore earned it for pure damn foolishness."

"Thanks," the lawman grinned icily. "Make it rye, Hellfire . . . an' good rye. No happydust in it, savvy? I'll be proud to say I was the last one to drink on the Vulture.

"Last one?" the renegade lifted inquiring brows, apparently unsurprised that he had been recognized. "How come?"

"After tonight," said the lawman with grim emphasis, "the Vulture won't be interested in likker."

Hellfire weighed the statement as he opened a bottle of Yellowstone, shoved it out with a glass. "Threat or a promise, Lightnin'?" he chuckled.

"Both," returned the lawman, coolly, and downed his drink.

"Yo're shore hell fer bold, feller," beamed the renegade. "What went with Weasel? That little shad-bellied snake was smooth as two eels in a bucket uh lard an' a bundle uh six-gun swift."

Lightnin' sighed, wiped his mouth. "No man is safe, Hellfire, who thinks he's too tough to kill. Powder an' lead ain't no respecter uh persons. Weasel was loosed on me, done some thinkin' about ways an' means but couldn't make the riffle. I had to kill him."

The killer's eyes shone admiringly. "Yeah? You shore must be lightnin'. But you ain't got brains enough in yore carcass to fill a pipe. After doin' that killin', you'd orta run fast an' far. But now that yo're here, you'll know how it feels to have a buzzard eatin' at yore guts. A human buzzard. Boys," he lifted his harsh voice, "here's the jasper what greased Weasel's skids into hell! How'd yuh like tuh be in his boots?"

A raucous roar of laughter answered him. And through the coarse echoes sheered the thin scream of a woman. It seemed to come from above, but Lightnin' could not be sure. He tensed, poised on the balls of his feet as silence succeeded. He was smiling now in that ghastly way that characterized his fighting moments. Out front was the clump of running boots. An excited renegade burst into the place, panting, gabbling. . . .

"Hell to pay, fellers! Weasel's daid! I finds him stiff an' cold beside a fire on the ridge. Not a bullet hole on 'im, but his head was most et away like buzzards had been workin' on 'im. Awful!"

Having delivered his news, the man darted through the side door and raced up the stairs. Hellfire looked at Lightnin' with hot accusing eyes.

"Mebby a hawss kicked Weasel," murmured the lawman, and moved toward those stairs.

"Hawss, hell!" bellowed Hogan. "You beat him to death with the butt uh yore gun. Hey! Where the hell you think yo're goin'?"

"Thought I heard a gal scream a bit ago," replied Lightnin', frankly. "An'

I'm funny thataway, Hellfire. When one uh them frail critters hollers, Lightnin' Rodd comes a-runnin'."

"Lightnin' Rodd!" gasped Hellfire, and the echo of his fear ran through the crowd. "Are you Lighton N. Rodd?"

"In person!"

The renegade gulped, paled, then got a grip on himself. "Hey! Whoa down. You never heard no woman scream an' you ain't goin' no place. Heave yore hands high like a tall tree!"

LIGHTNIN' smiled frostily but continued his slow inching toward the end of the bar. Hellfire Hogan paled, but not from fear of the lawman. From above trickled the sudden strains of wild music. A piano. The huge muscular hands of the Vulture were rippling across the keyboard of the instrument he had lifted bodily in the rape of Redwater, supposedly by Cassidy and his longriders. And from the weird chords his followers shrank now, muttering curses—or prayers.

For when this master of devilment played thus, evil plans stewed and bubbled in his brain and he was tortured by the yen to kill. Understanding vaguely, Lightnin' moved steadily toward the foot of the stairs. Hellfire Hogan dropped his hands and whipped up an ugly-barreled shotgun.

"H'ist, yuh ringtailed tinbadge!" he snarled, "or I'll saw yuh in two at the navel!"

Lightnin' shook his head, spoke softly.

"Don't interfere, Hellfire. Yore debt to John Law is a big one, an' long overdue."

"To hell with John Law! Reach or I'll blow yuh to Kingdom Come!"

An icy glint had deepened in the lawman's eyes.

"You've had your chance, Hellfire," he said so softly that no one but he heard it. And without the suggestion of muscular warning, he leaped.

His arcing left hand swept to the two-bored muzzle, depressed it as it spewed its thirty slugs into the floor. With the gun barrel as a lever and the bar edge as a fulcrum, he hurled himself up and over the polished counter. His hurtling boots caught Hellfire Hogan alongside the head, knocking him spinning into the narrow aisle between bar and backbar.

But Hellfire was tough and prided himself on it. Even as he landed, he stabbed an avid hand to his holster and fished out a long-barreled .45. Like a cat, Lightnin' lit on his feet, his eyes missing no bit of the renegade's gunplay. As Hellfire's hairy hand closed over his gun grip, the lawman's right hand flickered, moved. Almost like lightning. But even faster.

The crashing roar of heavy calibre guns shook the room, jarred the lights. And as the powder smoke boiled into the ceiling beams, the little deputy from Cheyenne was gone, his boots beating a lively tune on the stairs. Hellfire crumpled, his hand still clutching his smoking gun iron. Dead as a tick in sheepdip.

The whole affair had developed and culminated so swiftly that those watching it had hardly time to rise before it was over and the lawman gone. Now they churned forward, roaring vengefully, stampeding with bared guns for the staircase. The first one to show swallowed Lightnin's lead, dropped like a pole-axed beef. The rest backed swiftly, scattering out to cut off any chance of this curly wolf's escape.

Lightnin' bounded up the stairs to the landing, wheeled and gained the upper floor. It was black up there. And for a moment the lawman stood flattened against the wall, quieting his breathing, punching out empties and reloading.

A dread silence seemed suddenly to have gripped the place, a spine-prickling quiet that reeked of death. Then at the foot of the stairs, darkened now, sounded vague whisperings and shufflings as the renegades made quick plans. From somewhere on the second floor sounded a muffled groan, followed by a flat commanding curse.

LIGHTNIN' slid toward those sounds, feeling his way along the wall until he came to a door that yielded to his trial pressure. What lay inside that room he couldn't even guess, for it was dark as the maw of a tomb. For just a moment the lawman hung in that half-opened portal, prey to instinctive warnings to avoid this place. But repressed breathing in the hall behind him hinted at a more material danger in that direction. He entered, found the bar and dropped it into the slots.

Daring death, Lightnin' thumbed a

match. In its puny flickering beam, he stared into a background of heavy wooden bars behind which were eyes, haunting human eyes drenched with hopefulness. And worse—ranged along two walls tense figures poised with leveled guns.

The match flickered out and Lighton N. Rodd stood frozen with a feeling of total impotence. They had him badly hipped, it appeared, and the lawman's mind lashed out for a solution. There seemed to be none.

From somewhere came that flat, unmistakably venomous voice of the Vulture, ringing through the silence in a cynical metallic monotone.

"You came, Lightnin'," the voice said, "like the strong man you are. I read you like a book and, much as I detest your kind, am forced to admire you. When you downed my fastest gunman, Weasel, I had your true calibre. Together there is no limit to what we might do. But fate orders otherwise. You are just not the kind. And when I can't use a man, I kill him."

"If you can't use him, yuh murder him without a chance," amended the little lawman irately. "But it was a bet that some time you'd make a mistake in judgment and go down before a man that wouldn't lose his nerve. Tell me, yuh belly-crawlin', night-slinkin' snake! Is yore hand on yore gun?"

The Vulture laughed scornfully. "What matter, fool? A dozen guns are pointed at you. At a word from me, you die!"

"Give the word, then!" barked Lightnin', and went to the floor, his guns belching slugs at the voice. But each of his bullets clanged against solid steel behind which the master mind of the dope smugglers lurked. And the room seemed full of their coarse laughter.

From beyond the bars came a sudden soft sobbing and the lawman's rage flared. But a strange slithering sound overhead claimed his attention. A rustling such as a vulture might make as he shakes his foul pinions. The air pulsed to an eerie swishing like nothing so much as the soft beat of vulture fans.

Then, with terrible swiftness, something blankety, smothering, wholly enveloping, fell upon the little marshal from Cheyenne, flattening him to the floor as he fought desperately to avoid its meshes.

Now, like thunderbolts, the men of the Vulture fell upon Lightnin'. He fought lik a tiger, a thoroughly fettered tiger. Hopelessly. They ground him down. Somewhere a girl was screaming, peal upon peal. And the terrible laughter of the renegade chieftain gave answer.

In his struggles, Lightnin' got a hand loose, wrenched up his gun, jammed it into flesh and jerked trigger. Chortling as a form slumped away, he shifted the weapon. But then they seemed to swarm all over him. Exploring fingers found his head. A sodden crushing blow stirred fire beneath his skull. Night enveloped his mind.

V

AFTER Lightnin' Rodd had left them at the ruined Halleck Ranch, Sergeant Rolfe and Shotgun Galt followed the hound-like Ba'tise along a trail that led into the badlands. Hour after hour. Silently, almost sullenly, with no attempt to conceal their mutual dislike.

Now they dipped off the grassy bench into the Poplar River bottoms. Ba'tise came loping back to them with the first real evidence that Dakota Halleck was really in the hands of the Vulture. It was a pitifully bedrabbled, hoof-tramped bonnet.

"By gar," the breed exclaimed, "Ba'tise know now thees *fille* ees ride weeth de killairs, *oui*. Bad, dam' bad!"

"The stinkin' bleeders!" raged the Mountie. "God help the lady, if we fail to get through, wot?"

"Wot, is right," mocked Shotgun acridly. "Wot the hell? We can't get through standin' here. Wot's holdin' yuh, eh wot?"

The redcoat smiled thinly but said nothing.

They continued on to the river, bank full and raging angrily. Sergeant Rolfe whistled.

"Swimmin' water, old egg," he bellowed over the turmoil of the stream.

"Swimmin' water, hell," mouthed the longrider. "That's dyin' water, Mountie-man. I'll rise right up in meetin' an' state that she's wide an' deep an' almighty swift.

It'll take a real man on a scow-bottomed hawss to bust 'er open."

"Righto," agreed the Briton sneeringly. "And I suppose you rate yourself the man for the job?"

"In person," gritted Shotgun, with a full-mouthed curse. "I'm headed for Trigger to meet as good a man as ever throwed laig across a bronc. No river never stopped him nor me neither."

"I judge, Mister Shotgun Galt," sneered the sergeant, "you've had some practice swimming high water under pressure."

"Plenty," smirked the outlaw, silkily. "Plenty practice. An' I'll likely git a lot more before ever I answer to certain ol' charges that still worry stray lawmen. Yo're supposed to be one uh the great Mounties that allus gets his man. How the hell do yuh get him if yuh can't cross a river till it goes down? Huh?"

The Briton's eyes narrowed. "That," he said stiffly, "is what I hope to demonstrate, old top."

"Fine," grinned the longrider. "More power to yuh. An' until yuh do, what yuh doin'? Quittin' here or wettin' yore seat?"

He lunged his horse into the muddy turbulent water and was almost immediately submerged to his chest and swept downstream as the horse struck out courageously. Sergeant Rolfe watched him for a fleeting moment, then whirled to Ba'tise. The breed was watching Shotgun, appraising the power of the current.

"Swank sent him into that," said the redcoat. "Can we cross it, Ba'tise?"

The tracker shrugged. "She's cold as hell an' mak' a feller grunt, *m'sieu*. But, by gar, no Canuck she ees afraid to try what thees Galt do. Come on."

CLINGING to the saddle horn and giving his mount free rein, Shotgun Galt looked back and grinned that the Canadians were following him. But as he screwed about in the hull, the grin was smeared from his face. Bearing down upon him at locomotive speed was a giant cottonwood, torn bodily from its base by the flood. Twisting and writhing and throwing its sundered roots aloft like the waving arms of a drowning man.

Shotgun gulped, spoke to his struggling horse.

"If ever yuh swam, red hawss, now s the time. If them roots foul us, me an' you'll be worse than buzzard bait. Hit it, red boy. Hit it hard!"

The bay laid its ears back to catch the sounds, then lunged ahead with redoubled effort. Now the river caught the beast, whirled it about. And in that second's delay, disaster found them.

Shotgun slid back in desperate haste to avoid the blow, caught the flowing tail of his horse. Under the shock of the ramming tree, the animal tilted precariously, then was swept under. Roots brushed Shotgun with ruthless fingers, tearing him loose from the horse. Something banged his head and he felt himself being sucked down . . . down . . .

Now Shotgun shot upward, free of the damning thing that held him. He broke the surface, gulped air and shook water from hair and eyes. His horse was gone and he couldn't see Ba'tise or the redcoat. Only a tumbled expanse of tossing waves and bobbing debris. For precious seconds he let the current whirl him downstream toward the roaring rapids. The bellow of cascading water grew constantly louder, more threatening. His boots, spurs and wet clothing were a dead weight upon him.

With flailing arms he struck out for the east bank. The current grew more swift, more treacherous. The brush-bordered bank neared, slipping along with startling rapidity. His hat, chin-strap held, bothered him and with a flirt he sailed it to dry land. The same with his dragging short guns. Considerably lightened, he turned on the last of his strength reserve, trudgeoning desperately.

Fifty feet below were willow limbs brushing the water. And he was heading into them surely, accurately. Forty feet . . . thirty. . . . His hand came up, fingers hooked to grab. Something tore at him with steel fingers. An eddy sucked him down. When he broke water again, he was fifty feet from the bank and hurtling like a bullet into the rapids.

Now he quit struggling, conscious of a gripping exhaustion. Just rode that awful current, drawing in the sweet air and dog-paddling to keep eyes front. The savage white water grabbed him. Down currents sucked at him.

SHOTGUN'S ears sang with the hissing crash of the rock-tortured stream. Sheets of spume blinded him. Cork-like, he was tossed over and over, whipped, buffeted, pounded. His mind blurred. Gone suddenly was any incentive to fight, where a man's mightiest efforts were like the beat of a linnet's wing.

Now he was down again, air denied him, his lungs bursting. Doggedly he held that foul air for its buoyancy. Then, when the pain became unbearable and his senses reeled, he paid it out slowly, measuredly. He gulped, and a cool balm soothed his aching lungs. A strange peace gripped him and the roaring seemed to die away. He opened his eyes. He was paddling weakly in a sheltered eddy, almost within reach of the shore. He kicked his way over, grasped a limb, dragged himself to the sandy beach.

After that he must have dozed, for he was suddenly awake, shivering with the cold. He felt strangely rested and curious that Ba'tise's black eyes were staring down at him.

"Hello, Canuck," he grinned. "Did you make it too?"

"By gar, *oui!* Ba'tise mak' de worse *rivière* dan de Poplar. But t'ings ver' bad, *m'sieu*—dam bad. Your horse she gone. Rolfe, she come t'rough all right, but de horse br'ak de leg an' Ba'tise slit de t'roat. De pack horse she come across. T'ree man, two horse. Bad, *m'sieu,* ver' bad."

"Not so good," agreed Shotgun. "But was all the walkin' washed away?"

"Walkin'?" The breed looked surprised, then grinned. "No, no, no. Planty walkin' she still left. You come walk weeth Ba'tise to the warm fire. Come. . . ."

He helped Shotgun to rise and assisted him to find guns and hat. Then led the way to a warmly blazing fire where Sergeant Rolfe stood disrobed. Clothes were dried. Then a shot of rum and coffee from the Mountie's pack and a meal, such as it was, fetched a laugh at recent perils and the grave uncertainties of the future. But not to the lips of Shotgun Galt.

Long trained to sweeping horizons with restless eyes, the longrider caught a movement on a slender butte that towered nearby. He studied it, descried four men watching them covertly from its crest. When the men were gone, Shotgun called the redcoat and the breed tracker into hard-eyed conference.

VI

AT ten after three in the afternoon, four men rode a dim horse track that led from the main trail to an isolated butte that rose close beside the margin of Poplar River. Halfway up they rein-tied their ponies, climbed slowly to the top. Seating themselves, they rolled cigarettes and idly surveyed the country.

"Where'd the chief git the durn fool notion they'd be somebody on this trail?" asked one.

"Playin' safe," rapped another, through trickling smoke.

"Won't nobody find that Halleck job till the snow melts next spring," gruffed a big, bearded fellow. "Nope, this is a wild-goose chase, just when I was figgerin' on a rest an' a good drunk."

One of his fellows had stiffened, shaded his eyes into the lowering sun.

"Yo're wrong, Spike. Damn if there ain't somebody comin' right now."

"Where?" Spike pulled out a saddle glass and focused it.

"A redcoat," he breathed, "an' a gun-totin' cow prod, looks like. With one uh them Cree bloodhounds readin' trail for 'em. Got a pack horse a-follerin' an' it looks like they might be comin' from Halleck's, shore enough. What the hell is a Mountie doin' this far south uh the line?"

"Lookin' for that redcoat, Tate, that's what," sneered another, half fearfully. "I told the chief he'd have a nest uh Mounties down on our necks an' he laughed at me. He'd better uh let Tate go in the beginnin', if yuh ask me."

"Couldn't leave 'im go, yuh fool," snapped Spike. "Tate'd found the underground."

"Why not kill 'im an' leave 'im lay?" the other asked.

"What I'd uh done," agreed Spike. "But the chief's nuts on the Mounties, hates 'em like snakes. His orders is to fetch 'em in alive so's he kin work on 'em. Plumb risky, says I."

"Aimin' to bump this Mountie, Spike?"

"Like to, worst kind," grinned the big

renegade, "but the chief says no. Fetch 'em, he says, an' fetch 'em we will. At that, I doubt they'll tackle the river this aft. We'll wait an' see."

They waited—and they saw. Like spectators to a good show, they saw the three take to the flood, followed their valiant fight and descried now the thin spiral of smoke writhing up from the willows.

"They made 'er," breathed Spike. "Providence shore looks after drunks an' fools. But, 'less I'm mistook, they's two of 'em afoot. Now here. . . . We'll ride down yonder an' make a play for 'em. They'll be cold an' wore out an' it orta be duck soup. Take the redcoat alive. That's all. Stir dust!"

They dropped to their horses, mounted and rode down to the flat. Loping through the bottom timber toward that curling smoke, they suddenly reined in. The breed tracker was running swiftly toward them, his rifle swinging to his stride, his eyes to the trail.

"Hey, you," bawled Spike. "You fellers lose some hawses?"

Ba'tise stopped abruptly, staring as if alarmed. Then he darted out of sight in the brush. This wasn't in accord with Spike's half-baked plans and he cursed luridly. But the blasphemy died half-uttered and his smoldering, smut-black eyes narrowed. The three men at his flank shot their hands to leather. For coming toward them at an easy canter, rode Shotgun Galt and Sergeant Rolfe.

THE outlaw rode slouched, right hand within inches of his big .45. The redcoated policeman of the Northwest Territories sat stiff in the saddle, his holster flap unbuttoned and tucked back. The two halted before Spike and his men.

"H'are yuh?" inquired Shotgun silkily. "What's the partic'lar diff-you-calty?"

"Nothin' eatin' us," returned Spike, with an appraising glance at his fellows. "But what the hell ails you that yuh try swimmin' Poplar on the roar thataway? Is they a war somewheres?"

"Try hell," sneered Shotgun. "We didn't try. We swum 'er, didn't we? An' the war we're ridin' into is in the hell town uh Trigger."

"What business yuh got in Trigger?" Spike asked coldly.

"Business with a polecat name uh Vulture, concernin' a redcoat callin' hisself Tommy Tate," said the longrider stiffly. "An' it's right pressin' business. Eh, Sarge?"

"Righto," agreed the Briton.

"Fool talk!" scoffed Spike. "But if yuh really got business to talk with the Vulture, it kin be arranged. We'll guide this redcoat in, and you other two kin wait here for 'im."

"I ain't so good at waitin'," vetoed Shotgun. "Nope, it's all or none, just like yuh see us."

"All right!" Spike shrugged, his thick lips tightening. "Git started up the trail. We'll foller yuh."

"Like hell you will," gritted Shotgun. "After you, we're first. The trail's all yore's. Lead out."

"Yeah?"

With a swift stab, Spike palmed a Colt's, flipped it level. His smutty eyes had shrunk to slits; his towsy head had settled boogery-like between his heavy shoulders; his hawkish face with its mashed, misshapen nose, was alight with a lethal stare.

"Now, you polecats," he spat flatly, "you've had your say. It's mine now, an' I'll make it short an' sweet. You big, would-be bad aig, take your tracker an' put yore hawss back across that river where yuh come from. The redcoat'll travel with us, whether he's willin' or not. Move now, or swaller lead."

His fellows were grinning with a rigid sort of pleasure, their hands pressed to their holsters. The Mountie sat stiffly, his eyes wide, his mouth gaping open as if he doubted that he had heard aright. Shotgun glanced nervously back toward the river, grimaced.

"A man kin hardly cross that water twice in an hour, feller," he protested, yet the smile on his face belied his concern. "That's nothin' but a death sentence."

"That's what I aimed it to be!" rapped the renegade. "Get goin'!"

With his left hand, Shotgun loosened his chin straps, tipped back his hat. It was a prearranged signal and a rifle cracked from the brush. With a strangled cough, Spike lurched, caught

at the horn and pitched down. The pistol dribbled from his numbing hands, he lost the light and clumped to the dirt.

Sergeant Rolfe had just uttered an amazed "My word!" when his simulated pose fell away from him. With a long-practiced swoop, he hit his holster and his big Webley leaped to hand, spitting a slug through the heart of a renegade who was even then unlimbering.

Shotgun Galt, always a disciple of gunswift, flashed a neat draw and thumbed two .45 slugs into one of the remaining two and gunned the weapon from the hand of the other. By "a plumb slip uh the thumb," as he explained afterward. The lone survivor reared his horse, wheeled and dug out in a veritable leaden sleet. Only the fact that he rode "Injun," hugging horsehair, saved him at all.

THE clock of time had ticked ten times. Three men were dead and a fourth, certainly not unscathed, was high-tailing toward Trigger. Something devilishly efficient about that snap-shot plan of Shotgun's and their terrible team-work. But it seemed not to weigh too heavily upon either the longrider or the redcoat. For the first time in a long, hard day they smiled into each other's eyes.

"A rare team, Galt. Eh wot?"

"You said a mouthful, Sarge. It's a hawss apiece. One for me, one for you and one for Ba'tise."

Ba'tise came charging up astride of Spike's big sorrel horse.

"Bon!" he cried, a grin from ear to ear. "Dose plan she work fine, by gar. But for why you let dat feller get away? Eef he get first to Triggaire, we fight de whole dam place, I tell you dat. *Oui!"*

"Let's get 'im!" croaked Shotgun, and shot his horse into a gallop. Ba'tise and the redcoat followed, hard on his trail. Spurring into the fast westering night to cut off an alarm that would fetch down the gun-riders of the Vulture.

Slowly but surely Ba'tise forged into the lead. Soon his fresh, strong commandeered pony drew 'way ahead and was lost to sight. The other two mounts, wearied by their tussle with the damming flood of Poplar River, were spent.

The way led across an arm of the prairie, a well-marked trail that swung into the lowering foothills. Night fell and chill darkness shrouded the trail. The way grew rougher and the Mountie's horse stumbled, went to its knees. He pulled it up, reined to a stop.

"Damn it all!" he complained bitterly. "My beastly nag is quite tuckered. Not a canter left in his bally bones."

"No worse off than mine," mourned Shotgun. "An' we better walk 'em from here in if we don't want to be set afoot. At that, we must be gettin' somewheres near Trigger."

"Quite so," agreed the Briton, and held up a warning hand. "Ssh! Hear it? Someone coming—fast."

They drew to opposite sides of the trail, sat stiffly as hoofbeats pounded toward them, getting louder and louder. Now the shadowy forms of horse and rider broke over the skyline. The two waiting men gripped guns. Then the Mountie chuckled. . . .

"It's Ba'tise. Hey! Looking for us or running away?"

The breed plunged to a jolting stop.

"Woof!" he breathed a sigh of relief. "Ba'tise t'ink he not find you, *m'sieus.* Why you stay back, hey? Ba'tise not catch dat feller an' ride into Triggaire before he know eet. Poof! Like de nort' win', dose feller she come lak da hell to blow Ba'tise off the trail. Listen!"

From afar came the dim flutter of hoofs.

WITH that far-off fluttering threat in his ears, Shotgun Galt looked quickly about him. They were in a bad spot, one devoid of cover large enough to hide a man, let alone a horse. But in the coulee, just over the rise ahead. . . .

"Come on!" he called to the others, spurring his weary horse. "We'll hunt a hideout till they pass, then take a quick pasear into Trigger."

They swarmed after him, their hoof-beats echoing stridently as the horses struggled up the sharp slant. Almost together they burst over the skyline, tipped down into the coulee, just as a dark blot of horsemen hove into view across the way. And that they were glimpsed was attested by a chorus of howls and a quickening of hoofbeats.

Then ensued a race for the bottom, with the fresh ponies of the smugglers holding a distinct edge.

Now crimson flashes bit the gloom as the smugglers went into action. Bullets hummed about the heads of the three invaders, who lay low along the withers and rolled their spurs. A slug tunneled Shotgun's horse. With a wracking sigh, the weary beast went down.

Shotgun lit like a cat, snatched the Winchester from its scabbard and tore for an upthrust nest of rocks. Sergeant Rolfe quit his trembly-legged beast and followed the swiftly leaping longrider, his big Webley singing rhythmical salvos. Ba'tise rode his horse square up to the covert, leaped clear as the animal took a bullet in the brain and fell, kicking. The breed leaped in beside the outlaw and the Mountie, crouched low as he slipped the breech to verify the waiting shell.

"By gar," he panted grinningly, "I don't t'ink dose feller she like Ba'tise."

Shotgun grunted, firing, rocking the lever, firing again. Always a hair below and to the right of flashes that now flared in a sinister and growing half-moon about the toe of the rising ground. The redcoat held his fire, sat hunched below the natural parapet, his long face cloaked solemnly with the seriousness of his thoughts. Now he stirred. . . .

"Ba'tise," he snapped, "give me that rifle. With only two of them, Galt and I can hold this bally fort as well as the three of us. You're wasting your time in here with your wolfing ability. The back way is open. We'll keep them busy here while you ease into Trigger. Get to Tommy and slip him out if you can. Strike north. We'll take our chances."

"But, *m'sieu*—"

"Orders, Ba'tise!"

The breed grunted, passed his rifle to the redcoat. Then, drawing his keen-edged skinning knife, he squeezed out through the rocks. Like the passing of a moon shadow through the scrub, he vanished.

The battle settled down to blasting volleys from the smugglers, who slowly but surely ringed the holeup; to slow, careful firing by the beleaguered pair; and to definite interludes of painful and ominous silence. In one of these latter, a harsh voice thundered from below.

"Hey, you up there! You better cave before yuh cash! We've got yuh hipped like a roostin' turkey ag'in' the moon!"

"Yeah?" sneered Shotgun, brushing blood where splattering lead had nicked his face. "Why don't yuh shoot us loose? Yuh can't allus sometimes tell what's turkey by lookin' at the wishbone. This time yo're a-crowdin' Shotgun Galt an' yo're shore due to know what hard times is."

"Ha!" chuckled Sergeant Rolfe behind him. "Then you admit being Shotgun Galt, eh wot?"

"Damn right," snarled Shotgun, turning on him. "What of it?"

"Nothing right now, old fellow," said the redcoat softly. "Maybe later. . . ."

"An' mebbyso not," spat the longrider. "Later'll take care of itself."

"Better come out with yore hands up," came the voice rocketing from below. "If yuh only knowed it, surrender is a break fer you three. Le's talk this business over."

"Shore!" gritted Shotgun, in evil humor. "We'll have a long-distance wau-wau—with Winchesters."

"Don't say we never give yuh a chance," raged the one below. "From here out we puts our yawps down in stiff brine an' sets forth tuh salt yore carcasses."

"Look out we don't stunt your growth while yo're doin' said picklin'," cackled the longrider. And snapped a shot where he had carefully targeted the voice. A yowl of pain attested his judgment.

"Shower down, gunnies!" one of the smugglers bawled. "Let 'em have what they're askin' for!"

A DEADLY circle of muzzle-flame belched lead at the rock-bound pair, lead that spatted flatly or screamed off their stony covert. Grouching there to escape the lethal hail, the two were both thinking of the same thing, hoping against hope that coyote-like Ba'tise might use their futile fight against hopeless odds to break through to the lair of the Vulture.

The moon came up, pallid in a fog-like haze that was drifting in from the north. It bathed the hillside with light and added to the peril of the bayed pair.

To shoot, their heads must clear the rim of their parapet. And each time their heads showed, the wary smugglers redoubled their fire. To add to the risk, the renegades were closing in now from above, keeping always under cover. In fact, one of them had already reached a covert from which he could shoot down into the rock nest in which the fugitives were forted.

A bullet spat the rocks within inches of Shotgun, ricocheted and gouged the redcoat's left arm.

"Damme!" swore the Briton, snapping a shot at the bushwhacker. "The bleeders have got our range, Galt. It looks like the end of the jolly old trail, eh wot?"

"Shore does!" Shotgun smiled into the man's fearless eyes. "But looks is seldom deep enough to kill. I've been in a heap uh tights that I allus managed to eel out of. But if this is the last one, what better place could a feller ask? Up in God's clean rocks with a big yaller moon a-shinin' down. An' damned if I don't figger yo're a lot better feller for an outlaw to die with than live with."

"Thanks for that much, old egg," smiled the Briton, and stuck out his hand.

They shook soberly, looking each into the eyes of the other. As different as night is from day, they were alike, kin in that both were stamped with the red badge of courage. The main difference now was that the Briton was resigned, the longrider never. Even after exchanging a farewell grip, Shotgun lifted himself, squinted over the parapet. Like an inching snake, the muzzle of his Winchester slid into the clear, bead notching the sight.

Like a cat, he waited. Now a vague movement showed against the rough background of the upper slope. Shotgun fired. A man screamed, stood up, clawing terribly in the moonglow. Then he spun and crashed, tumbling head over heels downhill to land soddenly almost on the muzzle of the man who had destroyed him.

"Bravo!" cried the redcoat, and took new hope.

Two shadows streaked down the slope, diving to new coverts. Both Shotgun and Sergeant Rolfe fired, missed. And lead spattered and whispered about them, driving them flat, as the smugglers opened in swift reprisal for the death of their fellow. It couldn't last.

"How many ca'tridges?" queried Shotgun gruffly.

"Three for the bloomin' rifle," enumerated the redcoat, "and a baker's dozen for the Webley."

Shotgun chuckled acridly as he completed his inventory. "Beats me. I'm holdin' two .45-90's and three for my Colt's. A full house to beat. Humph!"

The Briton looked into the outlaw's icy eyes, shivered. "A beastly slender margin. We must make them last."

"Last hell," laughed Shotgun, and came swiftly to his haunches as firing slackened. His long gun leveled, spurted fire and lead. A sharp snarling cry lifted from the hillside and again that leaden sleet droned over their heads.

"Winged the critter!" laughed Shotgun, as he flattened. He was hard as nails, and looked it. Grim, graying, unyielding. He had burned down most of the candle of his youth along the dim windings of the Outlaw Trail, and seemed supremely careless when and how he squandered what little remained to him. He could laugh though he knew there was no chance of outside help.

But Shotgun Galt still had an ace in the hole. Two shells in one pistol, one in the other. When the hellions of the Vulture thrust over the parapet in their last concerted rush, then. . . . He settled back comfortably, gripped his weapons and waited, grinning.

"Sarge," he drawled flippantly, "we'll jest lay here easy-like, hold what shells we've got left, an' take five. Did yuh ever hear the yarn uh the Alamo?"

"Alamo?" repeated the Briton dumbly, "Cawn't say that I have. What is it?"

"Well," chuckled the longrider, "it's salty, an' bitter. An' the die-rections say take it straight. It's hard-case medicine, makin' ever' shot count, dead men draped over the rocks, an' us layin' here colder'n pickled pork with guns gripped an' belt loops plumb empty. If help don't come—"

"My word!" protested the Mountie. "Wot a beastly funk has got you, old bean."

And silence fell between them. Strangely, both were thinking now of the rock-hard little deputy marshal from

Cheyenne, little knowing that at that very moment he was lying in the lair of the Vulture, dead to the world.

VII

IN alternating waves of pain and unconsciousness, memory struggled out of its fetters and illuminated the brain of Lighton N. Rodd. He opened his eyes. He lay on a cot, behind the bars of the long room in which he had been overpowered. A dim lamp burned on the wall near the door, flooding the place with dancing shadows as wind rattled the place. The weather had changed. It was bitterly cold and blowing a gale from the north.

Lightnin' shifted. A shadow loomed over him. A round, comely face took shape in his distorted vision. Dark lashes — friendly brown eyes — pearl-like teeth that shook with cold. A beautiful girl, yet obviously a sad and frightened one. Beneath the eyes were dark circles, and fear and grief had laid heavy marks to frame her brave smile.

"Mister — er — Marshal Rodd," she breathed thankfully. "I'm glad you're awake. I was afraid—afraid that. . . ."

"Afraid I'd kick the bucket, eh, Dakota?" he finished for her with a grim chuckle. "Nope. I'm too tough fer that, gal." He rolled over and sat up. His head throbbed sullenly and his stomach felt sick. "My, my, you've grown to be a woman, Dakota. Last time I was in these parts, you was only a skinny little snip with braids down yore back. You mind that?"

She did, and gulped as two big tears rolled down her cheeks. Lightnin' smiled at her, patted her arm, rubbing his broken scalp gingerly.

"Gosh, Dakota. I feel like somethin' the next mornin'. What a mess I made uh this 'cause I couldn't keep my temper hobbled."

"I heard it all," she said wearily. "You did all anyone could have done. This —this Vulture toyed with you. . . ."

"Did he hurt you, gal?"

"No-o-o! Not that it matters anyway, after what he did at—" She gulped and her anger flared dangerously. "Oh, what a beast he is! How I hate him!"

"Steady, gal," murmured the lawman. "Now is the time for a cool head an' a steady hand. I know how yuh feel an' there's two of us. If I read the stinkbird correct, he'll be makin' medicine on me about sun-up. Soon as I kin pull myself together, I gotta see what kin be done about it."

"Done?" she laughed bitterly. "What can be done unless help comes to us? And who would there be to help?"

"Sho' now," he muttered comfortingly. "You got lots uh friends, an' so have I. An' they better be comin' on the dead run or our griddle cakes'll be dough. Don't you worry, little gal. I'll git us outa here—somehow. I ain't never been murdered yet an' I'm gettin' kinda old to start now."

His last words were harshly, fiercely spoken and were based upon his sudden realization that they had emptied his pockets, as well as his holsters. And therein lay their only hope. For these bars were solid timbers bolted to floor and ceiling, the door was chained and padlocked, and the windows securely boarded. A low groan rumbled through the gloom.

"What's that?" snapped the lawman, and clambered shakily to his feet. And not until then did he recall those staring eyes in the flare of his lighted match. "Who's in here with us?"

The girl came close.

"Three others," she whispered, her eyes wide with despair. "Two of the Vulture's own men being slowly starved to death. And another poor fellow."

"I know," gritted the marshal. "Tommy Tate. Where is he?"

He staggered tipsily about the end of a thin partition, glimpsed a man lying on a cot. He would have turned in there, but Dakota's low "This way," stayed him. He followed her to the second stall down and paused, shocked. Limp on a cot lay a living skeleton, a shell of a man whose sunken eyes, shaggy head and cold, gray pallor belied the slight rise and fall of his chest. Under the half-pulled blanket could be seen the mocking red tunic of the Northwest Mounted. Constable Tommy Tate.

Lightnin' stared at him for a brief moment, his own pain and weakness forgot-

ten. His breath came faster and his rage soared. Here was the handiwork of the Vulture.

A mad desire to kill was again upon Lightnin', a terrible urge to wipe out in blood the excuse for this wreckage, for that shambles at the Halleck ranch. Hate coursed the veins of the little marshal from Cheyenne, warmed his blood with fighting ire, made him tremble as if in the grip of ague.

Now he strode to the side of Tommy Tate, sat down upon the cot. He felt the man's emaciated wrist, was shocked at the lack of pulse, at the grave-like iciness of it. He rolled back an eyelid, shuddered.

"Purty low, gal," he said softly. And then shook the unconscious man. Tommy! Tommy Tate! It's Lightnin' Rodd! Lightnin'. Understand, Tommy?"

The man groaned, twisted, half awoke but slipped back. Someone cursed deliriously in the adjoining stall, and the wind wailed mournfully outside. It took five minutes to rouse the man to a point where he could open his eyes. He stared into the faces above him with the maniacal fear of one who has just gone through a terrible nightmare. Then came the warm light of recognition.

"Lightnin'!" he whispered. "Good ol' Lightnin' Rodd. I might uh knowed it'd be you that would come. But yo're too late, boy. Yuh come too late. Tell the Ol' Man, the Inspector or — or Jimmy Rolfe that I—that the Vulture—the Vulture is—" He struggled terribly to blurt out the thing that gripped him.

"Steady, Tommy," said the marshal. "Tell Rolfe that the Vulture is what? Think hard, boy. What was it?"

Tate smiled, bit his lip. His breath was a ragged gasp. "The Vulture is fetchin'—fetchin' dope down Black—Black Fox Gorge. By raft. The trails is—is all jest plants." He caught Lightnin's lapels as if to hold himself from slipping across the brink into eternity. For a long moment he clung there, his eyes drenched with appeal. "Will—will yuh, Lightnin'?"

"I'll tell Rolfe, Tommy. He's around here somewheres. When he gets here, we'll take you to a good pill-roller an' get yuh back on yore feet."

The dying man shook his head. "Too late, feller. It's shore hell, what I've went through. But now . . ." he smiled, relaxed. "Now it's my move. So long, Lightnin'."

He fumbled for the hand of the little marshal, pressed it. Then the light seemed to burn out of him. Lightnin' laid his ear to the skinny chest, rose abruptly, an icy smile chilling his features.

"Dead!" he murmured, more to himself than to Dakota. "Starved. Poisoned. Froze. As fine a boy as ever drawed a cinch strap. An', God willin', the last victim of the Vulture." He drew the blanket over the gaunt face of the dead man.

Over the moan of the wind the beat of hoofs lifted from the street below. A rumble of voices, slog of boots and slamming of heavy doors. Someone came tramping up the staircase, rattled a key, shoved into the big room of the cells. One of the smugglers, blue with cold, walked to the bars, unlocked the padlock.

"Hey, you feller called Lightnin'! Come outa that! Chief wants to look yuh over."

Dakota caught her breath, paled, but Lightnin's long training in self-control put a lazy drawl in his voice as he confronted her.

"Take things like a soldier, gal. This may be the break we been prayin' fer. Anyway, it's in bigger hands than ours now. I'll be seein' yuh."

He patted her hand, turned abruptly and walked out of the cell. The padlock clicked shut. The lawman preceded the renegade into the hall and was conscious that the dawn had come, bleak and cheerless. They passed the head of the stairs and the lawman felt a warm blast coming from below.

"Whoa!" barked the guard. "Right in there."

LIGHTNIN' let himself into a big room, cozy with heat from a red-hot pot-bellied stove. Before the fire stood the Vulture, removing fur-lined gloves, thawing the cold from his gaunt frame.

"Well, my nosey friend," he purred, drawing the greatcoat. "It would seem that your luck had fallen on evil days.

I hope you have enjoyed our poor hospitality."

Lightnin' shrugged. "No kick. I've allus took the good along with the bad. Life's like a poker game. If yuh whine or quit when the cards fall bad, yo're only scrub stock. It's no trick to win with good cards. But the real man plays 'em as they fall, never welshin', never cryin', never blowin'. Playin' the hand for just what it rates an' never drawin' a bet till the last card is played."

"Bravo!" applauded the master renegade. "Beautiful sentiments, Lighton N. Rodd. But terribly impractical. Let us say the creed of lawmen and weaklings —and fools. You know?" He laughed softly as he seated himself at a long desk. "I don't know why I have played with you. The pleasure of a new thrill, I imagine. You were a blade fit to cross an' had me guessing as to your lone-wolf business in Trigger. Now I return from a little secret night business, to find that you are a U. S. Marshal working with the damn redcoats!" His voice had hardened and tailed out in a venomous hiss. "Hoping to catch the Vulture napping, to take my attention while your pards wolfed into Trigger."

"What yuh mean, 'my pards?' " snapped Lightnin' savagely.

The renegade laughed sourly, drew from a drawer the contents of the lawman's holsters and pockets. Two six-guns wrapped in their gunbelts. A knife. Keys. Greenbacks and a few coins. Cigarets and matches. He spread them out before him, eyed them with ill-veiled triumph. Lightnin', his eyes narrow slits, rose to the balls of his feet and swayed toward him. With a movement too fast for the eye, the Vulture palmed and leveled a stub-nosed pistol. His eyes glowed death.

"That's the quickest way, Lightnin' Rodd!" he snarled. "And if you are wise, you will remember that there is hope for you until you are dead." He smiled thinly. "You asked what I meant by your pards. Your ignorance is refreshing but only confirms what I know. Three men, led by a Mountie, tried to slip into Trigger by the south trail after killing three of my men. We've got them hipped and it's only a matter of time. . . ."

The lawman's heart sank. Their well-laid plan had failed to fool the Vulture. He flashed a wry grin, as the gusty wind fetched him the distant sound of guns.

"Settin' purty, eh?" he mocked. "Winnin' every hand? Mebbyso, mebby not. You've got a dead redcoat in the cell yonder, an' it's him that'll be the end uh you, Vulture-man. When yuh murdered that kid, yuh turned loose a flood uh redcoats that'll roll yuh into Boothill. Redcoats with somethin' more important on their minds than partnerin' with a U. S. Marshal."

"Tate dead?" The renegade grimaced. "About time. Three months for him. A really tough baby, if you know what I mean. I wonder if you'll be as tough? No, Lightnin', if you'd come from the south and the redcoat from the west, I could believe it accident. But otherwise, it's design. If I needed more to convince me, these—" he held up the pack of imported cigarets and Lightnin' stiffened— "these would do the trick. Good fags used by most of the Mounties. Even Tate used them. And I've smoked them many's the time."

Lightnin's heart was beating like a triphammer as he dropped his eyes.

"I could do with one now," he muttered, leadingly.

The Vulture laid piercing eyes upon him. Fear tugged at the lawman's heart. Could this uncanny devil read the innermost secrets of a man's heart? As the man smiled icily, Lightnin' wondered if he was still toying with him.

The renegade nodded, tossed over the flat pack with the lone cigaret in it, slid a match along the board. Then for a long minute, he studied the package in his hand, as if he sensed that all was not well with them. But he must have been pondering something else. For in the end he extracted one of the slender tubes, stabbed it between his misshapen lips. He picked up a match, held it poised with his thumbnail on the head.

FROM below came another roar of racing hoofs, clamor of excited voices. Riders milled in the dooryard and men were trooping into the barroom. Someone

bellowed in a rough voice up the stairs.

"Hey, Chief! We've ketched one uh them three kioties. Come on down an' give a look."

A look of unholy joy lit the face of the Vulture as he rose. He fixed terribly malevolent eyes upon the lawman.

"You first, my reckless friend. I want you to see these partners of yours as my men fetch them in."

He seemed to have forgotten the cigaret between his teeth. Lightnin' cursed the man's fiendish luck. And wondered who the prisoner was. With the master renegade at his heels, he descended to the main floor. The barroom was dotted with gloved and coated men, bristling with weapons and lowering at a very cold and sullen prisoner. Ba'tise!

The Vulture addressed him. "Know this man?" indicating Lightnin'.

The breed looked up, batted his eyes, shook his head. *"Non!* Ba'tise not know dis wan," he denied sullenly. "Beside, I tell you nothink."

"Shall we start this 'un on the dope, Chief?" called out a burly smuggler.

"Dope?" The coarse laughter of the Vulture filled the room. "Not so you can notice it. That's for redcoats, understand? And for nosey ones who cross the Vulture. This one is an animal . . . a Cree breed. Look, Lightnin'. Here's how the Vulture serves this kind. . . ."

He stepped close to Ba'tise, who was bound hand and foot, caught his jaw in a steel grip, tipped back his head The breed was powerless in that cruel hold. When his chin tipped up, the Vulture stepped close in. His right hand flicked like a flash of flame, came away from his belt with a glittering blade. Its point licked upward like a fanging snake, bit the breed's throat. Then down, with a coward's bravado, to sever Ba'tise's bonds.

Lightnin' Rodd cried out, stood rooted with a ghastly fear. The Vulture released his victim, leaped back to avoid the swift gush of claret. Ba'tise's head came down and he teetered there in the grasp of an awful weakness, staring with horrified eyes at his life blood spurting to the floor. Now his gaze, stiff with a deadly hate, swept to the insanely reveling Vulture and his hand dropped to the hilt of his razor-sharp skinning knife.

"By gar!" he muttered vacantly. "Dose Vulture, she keel Ba'tise!"

He took a single step, jerked the keen knife convulsively, still glaring at his murderer, shuddered and slipped slowly down. He sprawled, tried to rise, rolled over and lay still. He was dead, and the Vulture's terrible slaughter vied with the shriek of the wind to torment that eerily silent room.

It had all been too fast for the muscles of Lighton N. Rodd to respond to the berserk rage that flamed in his veins. It was as if some mighty hand held him from leaping at that brutal killer. And then, when the first shock had passed and he was tense to leap at the Vulture, one thing held his hand.

Strutting before his men like a vain, fully gorged buzzard cock, the Vulture reached for and thumbed a match. He flipped the tiny flame upward.

VIII

CIGARET dangling mockingly from his curled lips and smoke trickling from his flaring nostrils, the Vulture turned Ba'tise face down, as if bored at looking at the thing that, for the moment, had tickled his vanity. But so great was the hate the breed had borne this monster, that even in death he held grimly to his skinning knife, even when the Vulture turned him over.

Now the Vulture let his eyes, afire with homicidal lust, flick to Lightnin's flushed face. His lips parted in a sneer. But what he might have said was never uttered. As suddenly, as terribly as the lightning bolt sweeps downward to destroy, a fan of blue smoke obscured the hateful visage of the master renegade. Like the ugly bark of a .45-90, an explosion rocked him backward. But somehow he caught himself as his senses and his mighty strength rocked in the balance.

The smoke passed. Where once had been a cynical, snarling face, now only a reddish smear leered where eyes and nose and mouth had been was nothing. It was as if a ruthless hand had brushed down those features, destroying them.

From that face poured forth a bleat of pain and rage and horror. A doom cry. For the Vulture was doomed — blind,

broken, horribly maimed. And the wonder was that he was not dead.

For a long-drawn shivery second the cohorts of the Vulture stared at that magic transformation in frozen silence. Stood impotent, chained by fear and dread and superstition, making no move to prevent Lightnin's swift dart to their leader's side. From behind the renegade leader, the little lawman shot his hands to the butts of the Vulture's pistols. But the ruined man still retained his old cunning. With a snap, his huge hands came down, fastened Lightnin's wrists.

Up came the lawman's knee to the small of the renegade's back. With that leverage, he pried his right hand loose. Then the left.

As he broke loose, the lawman jarred the renegade around. Then, with every ounce of his strength, he planted his ridged knuckles in the Vulture's muscle-plated belly. With a croaking scream, he went down.

The judgments of fate are strange and hard to fathom. And never was that truer than now. Upon the floor, face down in the filth, lay dead Ba'tise. His nerveless right hand still clutched his knife, hilt to the floor, point aloft. Staggering backward from Lightnin's blow, the Vulture tripped on Ba'tise's moccasins, fell headlong. And the breed's knife spitted him, lancing his ribs and piercing his icy heart. He stiffened, cried out, then slumped. Ba'tise' dead hand had taken vengeance.

IN a swift, darting scoop, Lightnin' palmed the Vulture's guns. Two long leaps put him behind the red-bellied stove. In that mad moment the smugglers broke their fetters of terror and went into action. But already the little lawman's guns were talking. He was fighting now for life —and more.

Never had he fired more methodically, swiftly, accurately. Never wasting a shot. Those in the front rank writhed downward like tenpins. Bullets smashed against the cast-iron stove and screamed away in harmless caroms. Then a dead-center shot split the stove from end to end. The pipe came down in a blinding cascade of soot and smoke. Red coals dumped onto the puncheon floor, licked up an avid blaze. In an instant the place was murky with smoke, lurid with flame.

Panic hit the renegades. Bawling like cattle, they stampeded for the door, took the frame out as they jammed, leaped for their horses and fled. Their spirit was broken, their courage gone, their faith shaken. The Vulture had led them into crimes far beyond their conception or appetite. Now the Vulture was dead and this undersized, freckled hellion was hosing them with lead.

Lightnin' vented spent shells, leaped to the side of the Vulture, reloaded. And his eyes strayed to the fatal knife, buried to the hilt in the human buzzard.

"God's judgment or the Devil's jest," he muttered, coughing from the smoke. "I ain't shore which. But it's the Vulture's finish an' our big chance."

He leaped to the stairs, and up. As he wheeled on the landing, the guard broke into the clear on the second floor, gun leveled to block him. The man fired—too swiftly. Missed. In times like this, Lightnin' never missed. He loosed two slugs and the man came cascading down the stairs, tail over tin-cup. With eager fingers, the lawman frisked the body of its keys, leaped to the second floor, filling now with smoke. There was no time to spare if he was to finish his work.

From the cell room came a scream and a chorus of howls. But Lightnin' took time to enter the Vulture's quarters to belt on his own guns, pocketing the ornate weapons that had served him so well in the shambles downstairs.

Now he was at the cell bars, looking at the panic-stricken eyes of two wretched dope-starved desperadoes and a frightened girl.

"Quick, Marshal!" implored the girl. "The building must be on fire."

"Steady gal," soothed the lawman, and turned to the two trembling men. "How about you two? Like to git free?"

"Have you got a key, mister?" gulped one. "Leave us out. This hell-hound's been killin' us by inches."

Lightnin' calmed him. "Would you fight to git out? Would you risk your lives? The Vulture's men have run but, unless I'm bad mistook, they'll rally down the trail a piece, an' make a stand. Their necks

depend on wipin' us out. Will yuh fight 'em?"

One of them straightened his wasted form. "Would I, brother? Hand me a slug uh raw meat, a swaller uh cawn likker an' a Winchester an' watch me."

"An' that goes for me, pardner," blatted the other one. "I'd rather die burnin' caps than starvin' to death on the Vulture's dope."

"Come on!" snapped the lawman, and opened the door.

QUICKLY as possible, Lightnin' herded his charges downstairs to the kitchen, where sidemeat was frying on the stove and coffee bubbling. The cook had decamped.

"Dakota," he told the girl, "get yoreself some breakfast an' throw some grub into these boys. Not too much or their hoofs'll fall off from founder. Nev' mind the fire. It will be half an hour before these logs burn much. Throw grub in a sack. We may need it. An' here. . . " He handed each of the men one of the Vulture's pistols "If you have trouble while I'm gone, stand up for this gal. I'm countin' on yuh."

"Leave it to me," said one, spinning the cylinder. "Right now I'd be wilder with this gun that a sheepherder with a lasso rope. But throw two snorts uh redeye an' two cups uh java down my guttle an' I'll draw a bead finer'n frogs' feathers. Or if you kin find me a shot uh the Vulture's happy dust. . . ."

Lightnin' held up his hand, darted out of the room. A few minutes later he staggered back with a bottle of whiskey and fur coats he had stripped from dead renegades. His eyes were streaming water from fighting smoke.

Fur-coated, the lawman went outside. It was fully light now, but bleak and windy. The sky was darkly overcast and the north wind wailed like a banshee down the river bottom. Lightnin', knowing his Montana in late October, opined it would soon spit snow.

Head down against the gale, he headed up the street. No one showed as he sprinted to the stable, although smoke boiled from a dozen chimneys. There were horses there and he hurriedly threw kaks on six of them, led them to the rear of the big log hangout that had been the Vultures. Tying them there, he ran red-shot eyes over the scatteration of shacks known as Trigger. A wift of smoke from inside the burning interior of the two-story log building stirred him.

Seconds were ticking away, precious seconds that might hold the difference between life and death. But in the heart of this little lawman, greater than his hopes, greater than his fears, was a bitter detestation of this place and all it had stood for. And in that grim moment he became a self constituted jury, found the place guilty; the cold-eyed judge who sentenced it to die, the merciless executioner.

Hand on his gun, he ran to the first shack, shoved inside. It was empty of occupants, yet a stove blazed comfort. With a savage thrust of his boot, he tipped the stove over, darted out and raced to the next. Repeated the performance. In the third one he found a huddled group of frightened women. He hesitated, puzzled. The cold wind whirled into the place and the women shivered in its chill. With a murmured "Excuse me, ladies," he backed out, slamming the door.

Minutes later, winded and weary, he headed for the horses. Across his arm were three Winchesters and belts of shells. Great clouds of smoke were billowing on the wind. Trigger town was dying, with fire roaring at its vitals.

Smoke had driven Dakota and the two renegades outside. They rose to the saddles. Lightnin' handed each of the men a rifle, swung up. From down the river came the storm-muted bark of gun-fire.

"You stay here, Dakota gal," said the lawman, solicitously, "until we come for yuh. An' you two that'd rather fight than starve, come with me!"

They nodded, gripped the guns eagerly. Stirrup to stirrup, they followed the little marshal down river toward the gun-battle in the rocks. Swift as the ruthless north wind at their backs, they plunged into the fight, their rifles spitting death at the ambushed smugglers. Some fell, others ran. The braver ones who elected to stand failed to bring down any one of the berserk trio who charged them. In the end, prey to renewed panic, they found their horses, fogged it, Colt's guns flaming in their

hands, smoke bursts trailing out behind.

FROM the nest of rocks, two cold and powder-grimed men rose, emptied their weapons at the fleeing renegades, then came racing down the hillside.

"Cheerio, old egg," called out the one in the crimson tunic. "You come like manna from heaven!"

"Yuh come jest five ca'tridges ahead uh boothill," cackled the longrider, and pointed down the bottoms. "Lookit them babies travel!" He capered, sang a little ditty of cattleland:

"Last time I see 'em, they was runnin' like a dart,
A-rollin' of their spurs an' a quirtin' right smart . . ."

"Save yore breath for runnin'," warned Lightnin' gruffly. "Them fellers is scairt but not whipped. They got no place to go an' their hides depend on stoppin' us before we git outa these badlands. C'mon, we're burnin' daylight. Fork these ponies an' let's hightail."

Shotgun Galt and the Mountie straddled leather and the five of them galloped back into the burning town. Vengeful howls and the crack of rifles lifted behind them. Dakota Halleck spurred out from behind the now blazing eyrie of the Vulture, joined them. Under hot spur, they roared through the doomed village. The redcoat, his eyes troubled, shot up beside Lightnin'.

"I say," he protested. "Cawn't we hold back those bleeders until I can find Tommy Tate and Ba'tise? They must have trapped the tracker or he'd have joined us."

"Both dead, Sergeant," Lightnin' fired back. "Tommy died about daybreak an' the breed was murdered in cold blood. But he took the Vulture with him. Nothing at all to stop for, Rolfe"

The Mountie bit his lip fell back. They loped swiftly up the west trail it being their only hope of exit. Climbing the grade out of Trigger they came in for a harrowing rifle fire from the rallying smuggler. Luck and the fact that a bouncing bronc makes for poor shooting saved them.

Once over the top, they found momentary relief. But the pursuit was organized and roaring behind them. In the narrow canyon of the West Branch of Poplar, they were alternately in the clear and under fire, as the turns of the trail either hid or exposed them. Then Dakota's horse went lame. The pace lagged. The yells of the pursuers became louder, more certain. Lead screamed sinister tunes about them. Behind a sheltering headland, Lightnin' called a halt, ordered Dakota astride his own horse.

"All right, Sergeant,'" and said coldly, gripping the rein of the lame animal. "Yo're in charge. Crowd the ponies. I'm dallyin' behind to let daylight through a flock uh livers."

"But, Marshal—" protested Dakota.

Lightnin' silenced her with uplifted hand.

"Don't auger with that feller, Miss," warned Shotgun. "C'mon. Here they come!"

They broke into a gallop and, for a brief moment, the little deputy from Cheyenne watched them go with a touch of sadness in his eyes. Would he ever see them again? He shrugged the mood away, led his horse into the brush and climbed to a clear vantage in the rocks. His Winchester lined toward the bend in the trail.

Now the lead rider among the pursuing smugglers showed. Lightnin' sent a slug over his head by way of warning. It had ever been his way in dealing with human wolves of the outtrails: warn them, then kill them. The leader paid no heed to the screaming lead. He was pounding up the trail now with a score of followers at his tail.

A cold smile framed Lightnin's face. His gun cracked. The lead rider plunged from his mount like a sack of hide and bones. His fellows swerved, milled around him in momentary confusion. And in that lapse, the lawman downed two more. Steadily, he fired, his sights always notched on human targets. Another man threw up his hands, plunged overside and was dragged away as his terrified beast bolted. A horse reared, took a slug meant for its rider, collapsed. One tried to rally the others. Lightnin' dropped him

Such shooting was too much As one man, the smugglers wheeled, roared about the bend and out of sight Lightnin' waited a few minutes to be sure they would not rally and take up the chase But they had obviously had more than enough

Lightnin' descended, mounted the lame horse and started slowly after the Mountie

and his charges Without much warning, the air thick with snow and the horse fought for each step against the cruel edge of the blizzard wind. Forty-five miles to the first shelter—Halleck's mine. Forty-five miles of biting cold snow-shrouded trail on a horse that was helplessly lame.

IX

THAT was a tough ride, as tough as Lighton N. Rodd ever took in his adventurous life It blew and snowed steadily and the lame animal went slower and slower. The wind bit deep into the lawman's bones until he was forced to walk to keep his blood running. Sleepiness tortured him and he beat it back by self-inflicted pain.

Time and again he halted, looking with tired envious eyes at some sheltered spot where the wind was cut off and where he could rest. But rest meant sleep and sleep meant death. Only his iron-ribbed will and his rugged strength kept him going. Hour after hour. All that day and into the storm-plagued blackness of the night.

He lost track of time and at times the trail. Save that he knew the region so well he would have been hopelessly lost. He lost his horse in crossing West Branch, and was dumbly glad to be rid of the stiffened animal. Against a cutbank in the bottom, he built up a fire, thawed out his water-chilled body. Then he shoved west, plowing stubbornly toward his goal. And made it.

In the early morning hours he staggered into Halleck's mine, to find that Rolfe, Shotgun, Dakota and the two renegades had been there since the evening before. The little lawman was worn out, frost bitten, dead on his feet.

They rubbed him with snow, got rum-spiked coffee into him, put him to bed. At noon of the next day, he woke, rolled to one elbow. Dakota smiled wanly at him from the stove. The redcoat sat at the table, playing solitaire. The two rescued renegades and Shotgun Galt lay trussed in their bunks.

Lightnin's eyes glittered dangerously.

"What's the idea, Sergeant?"

"What a heel he turned out to be," spat Shotgun, with a broad curse. "No sooner lit here than the redcoated son of a kioat puts the deadwood on us."

Sergeant Rolfe chuckled. "One gets used to their squeals, Rodd," he said easily. "And the worse they are, the louder they yelp, wot? I've arrested Galt and the two smugglers and hold them to answer to Canadian law. Remember, sir," he smiled thinly, "we are considerably north of the Line."

Lightnin' nodded, seemed to be studying, "You think that's fair, Rolfe? Fair payment for saving yore skin?"

The Briton slammed down his cards, bristling. "That's beside the point, Marshal. I don't pay anyone to save my worthless skin. And if I did, it wouldn't be with freedom I am not empowered to bestow."

Lightnin' nodded, deep fires burning in his eyes. "Yo're right, Sergeant," he said wearily. "The law's the law and it recognizes no compromise. How's the weather? Snowin'?"

Dakota spoke up. "It stopped about an hour ago. But it's still threatening."

"Then we better get out of here before it snows us in. Sergeant Rolfe, what's your plan?"

"No plan, old fellow. Like you, I think it well to get where we're going. Not enough food here in case we're snowed in. I'll ride, with my three prisoners, to Fort Walsh by way of the Cree Villages. You take the young lady to—wherever she's going."

HOT words boiled to Lightnin's lips, but he swallowed them, nodding gloomy acquiescence. Dakota announced a meal, such as it was, and they filed up to get it, the prisoners having one hand loosed to eat with. It was a gloomy repast. When it was finished, the little marshal hurried things along. Horses were saddled, the three prisoners lashed astride. They were a horse short and it was agreed that Lightnin' and Dakota, being the lightest pair, should ride double on a strong, raw-boned gray.

Bundled in blankets, Dakota was lifted to the saddle, holding her eyes stiffly away from that new snow-piled grave by the corrals. Everything was ready for the parting. The two lawmen stood facing each other. Lightnin' grinned, stuck out his hand.

"So long, Sergeant," he said, heartily. "An' thanks for the cigarets. Without them we would all be dead right now.

They're the best brand, bar none, ever I laid lip over."

Puzzled, the Mountie frowned. "Dash it all, Rodd," he complained, grasping the marshal's hand. "I don't follow you. How could a fag save our jolly hides?"

"Easy. You've got one in your mouth now, ain't yuh?"

"Yes, but I don't—"

"You will, Sergeant. I'll show yuh. Look up at Miss Dakota. So. Now, lift the chin a trifle higher. There. Now the Vulture had one in his mouth just in that manner, when all of a sudden . . ."

With every ounce of power in his compact body, Lighton N. Rodd swung a hard corded fist to the Mountie's square jaw. The man's feet lifted, he sailed backward, and fell with his head half buried in drift. He lay like a dead man, and Dakota screamed. Lightnin' leaped, cut Shotgun loose with swift strokes of his knife.

"Quick," he spat. "He'p me tote 'im inside."

"Comin' up," chortled the longrider, alighting. "Momma, what a lulu of a wallop."

Together they lugged the unconscious redcoat inside, laid him on a bunk. Lightnin' produced pencil and paper from a shelf, snapping an authoritative order.

"Cut loose them smugglers, Shotgun, an' haze 'em yonderly. If I ever ketch 'em in my district again, I'll give 'em worse'n the redcoat was figgerin' for 'em."

Shotgun nodded, darted outside. The little marshal from Cheyenne scribbled a hurried note, weighted it down in the center of the table. It read:

DEAR SARGE,

Plumb sorry the demonstration worked so perfect. Some time when you've cooled off, I'll explain. Daren't wait now account of the blizzard that's blowin'. Here's a message from Tommy Tate that'll make up for losin' yore prisoners. The dope is coming down Black Fox Gorge by raft. Lay for the polecats and you can wipe out the gang. Hope your jaw ain't too sore, old bean, and that you enjoy your walk to the Crees.

Yours for English cigarets,

LIGHTNIN'.

The stove chunked and the door carefully closed, Lightnin' straddled the horse the redcoat was to have ridden. Already the two renegades were gone, vanished in the swimming haze, their tracks leading south toward the Montana Line. The blizzard-swept hills were white, the sun an ochre ball inside a leaden gray circle. Sun dogs, precursors of storm, hung in its wake There would be weather.

Lightnin' led the way. The storm held off until they had passed the Border, then came with a hissing deluge of snowflakes. Perforce they must pass through Damnation Flats and there the poise of the courageous girl deserted her. And there the soft heart of the hard little deputy marshal asserted itself. Not in words. But in silent, comforting sympathy that made one forget that he had a grimmer side.

THAT night they stayed in a deserted line shack on upper Porcupine. It snowed more or less steadily but held off blizzarding. Which was why they rode into Glasgow in the twilight of the morrow. Before the door of Dakota's uncle, Lightnin' swung stiffly down, helped the girl to dismount. Her lip quivered as she took his hand.

"How can I thank you, Marshal?" she stammered.

His eyes danced. "I'm 'Lightnin',' to my friends, 'Marshal' to my enemies," he reminded her. "An' don't thank me. Havin' this ride with you, gal, is thanks enough for an old dog like me. Goodbye, Dakota. Some time I'll write you the things you're dyin' to know about all uh this. . . ."

"Don't," she replied. "Don't write. Come and tell me. And don't say good — goodbye. You're—you're all I've got now."

Impulsively she lifted to tiptoe, planted a soft kiss on his lips, then sped like a deer to the house. Stunned, Lightnin' backed a step, brushing his hand vacantly across his lips. He saw the girl enter the house, saw her in the arms of kinfolks, then wheeled to Shotgun's chuckle.

"Shut up, yuh low-principled kioaty," he rapped, "or I'll warsh yore ears with a .45 slug. It jest ain't seemly to hooraw a sacred thing like that."

He flung ahorse, led the way uptown in the gathering gloom. The lawman was thoughtful and the outlaw knew better than to take liberties with the mood. Lightnin' sighed. He and his critics agreed on one thing, at least. He'd never take no prizes in no beauty show. Undersized, redheaded and speckled like a turkey aig. Across the bridge of his nose a lurid scar—

one of many on his wiry body and each good for a yarn. Thin features, freckled batwing ears, high cheek bones and gimlet eyes of washed-out blue. What for the hell could any woman see in a layout like that?

"Shotgun," he said at last. "You're right-I'm wrong. An' you had a laugh comin' back yonder. For a moment I got soft, thinkin' of a purty gal, an' a kiss, an'. . . Shucks, what do I know about females? Nothin'! Nope, I'm draggin' off like a bear, to ketch up on lost sleep."

"Mebbyso, Lightnin'," cooed the long-rider, grinningly. "But don't you never bet no important money Dakota don't heel you with the long rope uh matrimony. 'Cause shore as you do, she'll call yore bet an' raise yuh five. An' some day I'll happen along an' ketch yuh wheelin' them five out in a papoose buckboard."

Lightnin' braced himself for a smart retort, looked into Shotgun's grinning face and caved. Silence fell between them.

LATER, when the horses were sold and the price of the rented animal dispatched to Beaverton, the two men walked to the station to board Number Four. A crowd waited on the platform despite the chill. A muted whistle shrieked from afar and the piercing eye of the headlight lanced the night. The rails tinkled and, with a growing roar and series of toots, the train bore in.

Just as the headlight was sighted, Lightnin's wary eyes swept the platform, came to rest on a smug paunchy character with a garish star pinned on his greatcoat and his thumbs hooked in his gun belt. The marshal's eyes narrowed and he nudged Shotgun.

"Wait a minute, feller." He crossed to accost the fat politician who held down the job of marshal of Glasgow. "H'are yuh, Tubby?"

Tubby Jenks whirled. "Look what the storm blowed in! What yuh doin' in a good town, Rodd?"

"Mildewin', mostly," grinned the man from Cheyenne. "Say, Marshal, you got anything against Shotgun Galt?"

"Shotgun Galt?" The town official shot his head forward, his eyes narrowing. "Got anything ag'in' that skunk that's ridin' with Curry an' his wolves? What for a fool question is that, Lightnin'? I'll tell a man I've got something' ag'in' that polecat, an' I'm honin' to git 'im acrost my sights."

"Yuh are, eh?" Lightnin's smile was frosty. "Well"—he swung a careless arm toward Shotgun—"there's yore man!"

The town marshal's eyes angled, rolled. He sagged, turned pale as moonlit snow.

"Well—well—looky here, Rodd. Wait a minute. Mebby I spoke outa turn. I'm plumb downright shore he's wanted for cash money, but I can't say for shore till I check up. Tell yuh what yuh do. Keep a eye on that bird while I hop uptown an' see. If I'm right, I'll draw a warrant an' swear in a posse. . . ."

He gulped and wiped sweat from his flabby face. Lightnin' nodded.

"Yeah, Tubby. You do that."

With a sigh, the man wheeled and Lightnin' chuckled at a fat man trying to hurry without looking like an overfed duck. By all the signs, Tubby Jenks would be hard to catch for the rest of the evening. There was a scream of brakes, a hiss of steam, the thunder of banging couplings as the big engine flashed past and sat down on the long passenger train. Lightnin' walked to Shotgun's side.

"Bo-o-o-oard!" boomed the conductor.

"If I was you, Shotgun, I'd hop this rattler an' drift."

Shotgun's eyes flicked to the ludicrous figure of the waddling town marshal.

"Reckon yo're right, Lightnin'. So long, pardner."

They gripped hands soberly.

"G'bye, Shotgun. Hang an' rattle an' tough 'er out."

When the train was gone, Lightnin' shook himself. He stood alone on the deserted platform, cold, unaccountably lonely. Up the street glittered the garish, inviting lights of saloons and gambling places. Yonder, on a side street, shone a single light where a courageous girl lived with her grief. Both lights drew this lawman and for a moment he weighed his course. For the moment he was not the wolverine of northern trails. Just a homely little man with an aching loneliness in his fearless heart. And in the end, he turned toward that lone beacon shining through the trees.

GUN-VULTURES OF THE BARRENS

By A. DE HERRIES SMITH

Ranger Norman Tyrrell tracked a callous butcher through the Barrens, knowing gun-play would be his final move. And then finding his prey, his trigger-finger froze—for the man was the father of the girl he loved.

"BACKWATER! Back! Hold her, Phillipe. Listen! There it goes again!" The deep voice from the bow of the canoe was urgent.

"Enh enh!" the Indian grunted, watching the ranger's shoulder.

The two men in the stained birchbark dug their paddles deep into the yellow

Tyrrell beat desperately at the savage dogs.

water, until the foaming current lapped their wrists icily. Norman Tyrrell half turned. The native caught the glint of his eyes as his quick glance swept the timbered banks.

For a split second the canoe was held, bobbing to the motion of the flood, the men's bodies swaying with it. Then again, over the roar of the Nootoquak, an echoing, cow-like bellow, filled the rock walled valley. *Baw! Baa-a-w! Ba-w!* An animal in pain. The ranger frowned.

"We're up with the rustlers at last," the thought flashed to his brain. There was a grim satisfaction in that.

The Indian, watching him, drove his canoe down. White water leaped to the gunwales of the little craft. She quivered with the strain. The two men forced her across the river, direct for the tangle of woods whence came the cry.

There was a soft crunch as the bow nosed into a little sandy cleft between two ice-polished rocks. Too good a riverman to risk injuring the canoe by any sudden movement, Tyrrell eased himself

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along, distributing his weight on the sides. He stepped to the sand on noiseless moccasins, and jerked the 30.30 Winchester from the bow. With a back-handed signal to the Indian youth, he commenced working his way through the tangle of willows and alders that reached almost from the water's edge to the summit of the rocks.

The ranger gained the crest and paused, alert, eyes sweeping. A quick glance told him that Phillipe, the Swallow, was watching. With his crimson waist sash a circle of flame against his yellow deerskins, the Indian youth was calmly stuffing his pipe with the raw "tabac Canadien."

"Got snakes' blood, these Indians, whether they're educated or not," Tyrrell grunted disgustedly.

No sound came but the muffled roar of the rushing river. The sun glinted on the red cliffs through which the torrent raced. Black spruce woods on either shore stood out in sharp contrast; silent, forbidding. They were empty as far as Tyrrell could see.

His gaze swept the valley again, searching for a tell-tale column of teepee smoke, but there was nothing to denote life but a single hawk, spiralling in wide circles against the cold blue sky.

Tyrrell stared hard at the figure below him. The Swallow had taken off his black Stetson, was tossing it up and down in the air.

"What the devil is he playing at?" the ranger asked himself. "Just acting the fool Indian, or signalling to someone in the woods?"

Suspicions coursed across Tyrrell's mind. Phillipe had been strange of late; morose and almost unfriendly. He glowered at the yellow figure below him, then turned, making his way through the stinging branches of the willow thicket.

This gave way shortly to a little plateau covered with reindeer moss and scattered wind-twisted jackpines, that fought with an unkind nature for a root hold in the rock clefts. Beyond was the silent forest; pools of dark shadows under the branching spruce, splotched with clumps of white-stemmed poplars. Nothing moved but the leaves, stirred by the current of air caused by the rush of water through the valley.

"This is where I've got to make a run for it," Tyrrell muttered to himself. "If the rustlers saw us on the river they'll be on the look-out. Don't like chancing that open, though. Maybe I'd better wait and work round—Oh, hell! Here goes."

THE ranger stepped out of the sheltering clumps of bush, rifle on hip, eyes trained on the forest opposite. He moved forward cautiously, trying to keep a line of the scattered jackpine between him and what he felt was the danger zone.

Woodland-trained feet in sensitive moccasins carried him forward without the necessity of taking his eyes from the timber line. The ranger reached the first tree, paused for a second, then crept forward again.

Whish! Whish! Whish!

Tyrrell was down, sharp particles of rock jabbing him through the ground's mossy covering. It was a lightning descent, a sudden throwing back of the legs that brought him flat in one single movement.

He lay prone and motionless for a breathing space, then slowly turned his head backward. Three bone-tipped arrows quivered in the jackpine above him!

Still not a sound or movement from the timber.

A long-drawn sigh of satisfaction escaped the ranger. Something was moving at last. The dark shadows under the spruce lightened momentarily with a faint, white blur.

"Eskimos!"

Tyrrell leaped to his feet. That white was an Arctic native's parka hood!

Three staccato shots, almost together, filled the rock-ribbed valley with reverberating booms, rolling back and forth from the bare, granite hills above the timber line. The ranger shot from the hip, racing forward. He reached the edge of the timber, and again threw himself through the air flat to the ground.

Tyrrell lay still, breath coming in short jerks, eyes trying to penetrate the shadows, gradually accustoming themselves to the half-gloom.

Ba-a-w! Ba-a-w! Again the cow-like moan from the woods.

He followed the sound, and faintly made out a threshing bulk on the ground ahead of him. After stems swished, and dry branches cracked. He jerked another shell into the breech, and stepped forward

warily, ears attuned to the varied noises of the forest.

"Damn butchers!" the ranger cursed, as the thing pumping out its life-blood on the moss took shape. It was a yearling musk-ox, white, curved horns digging up the forest floor in a death flurry, long hair quivering as the beast strove to rise.

To Tyrrell the musk-oxen were almost sacred; he was paid to guard them by the Canadian government. Aside from that an inborn love of nature revolted against the needless killing of the vanishing animals. The woods were full of moose, and the Barren Lands teeming with caribou. Enough meat there for all the tribes.

THE ranger waited patiently until the body began to stiffen. Then he worked the deeply embedded arrow out of the musk-ox, studying its craftsmanship, listening with all his ears for sounds from the timber. A distance - mellowed cough sounded thinly.

"They're gone," he told himself. "It's an Eskimo arrow, all right; inland Eskimo at that, and they're bad actors. Tipped with caribou horn. Hmm."

Tyrrell was a bold man, but a methodical one. Without method one does not long survive on the Arctic plains. He got down on hands and knees, carefully and hastily searching through the tangled brush and torn moss for some sign that might be used to bring home the killing to the Innuit's skin tents. A measured footprint, the tribal possession mark, made out of twisted willow stems, to be stuck in the carcass.

Footprints there were in the trampled moss, but too faint to be of service. Tyrrell walked round the musk-ox again, preparing to make his way out of the woods. All at once he stopped, pouncing at some shining thing that lay almost under the animal's long hair.

He held it up to a shaft of light filtering down through the lacy spruce fronds.

"Phew!" he whistled. "Here's real evidence. A white caribou skin glove! Now we're all set to go."

The ranger rammed it into his pocket and headed for the open. He reached the screen of alders and willows unmolested, and slid down to the beach. The Swallow nodded with Indian stoicism as Tyrrell handed him the arrow, watching his eyes.

"Enh, enh!" Phillipe grunted without apparent interest.

Tyrrell let it pass. Speech is brief in the Strong Woods and the Barrens; those who handle the paddle and the tump-line are men of action rather than words.

"Feed here?" the Indian queried. Native-like, food was always upppermost in his mind.

"Better not," Tyrrell said slowly, his eyes roving back over the woods.

The Swallow shrugged his deer-skin-clad shoulders, shoved the canoe off the beach, and eased himself into the stern. Another moment and the current caught her, the Indian steering for mid-stream, clear of the black bobbing heads of the "sweepers."

They swirled round bend after bend, past towering cut-banks of crumbling, gray shale, and low sand flats covered with willow thickets. Camp robber birds flitted along from tree to tree, keeping pace with the canoe, instinctive cunning telling them that free food was about to be theirs.

A dog-fox barked once from his den high up on a clay bank, but of Indian or Eskimo habitation there was no sign. The sun was high in the heavens, pouring down hotly into the trough of the river. Ashore the dark shadows under the spruce looked inviting.

"All right, Phillipe," Tyrrell called over his shoulder, nodding to a strip of grass, bright green against the yellow river.

The Indian threw his shoulders into the paddling. A minute later the canoe was beached and a spiral of blue smoke curling upward. Presently the scent of sizzling bacon filled the air.

The ranger pulled the glove from his pocket and tossed it to the Indian.

"What do you think of that for Eskimo work, eh?"

He chuckled to himself at the forced expression of astonishment on the other's face. The Swallow looked up at him, then back at the glove.

"That's not Eskimo," he said in the slow, distinct English of the missionary taught native. "Indian work. I know the Yellowknife beading. A woman's glove."

The ranger frowned. "Rot, man; why would—"

"It's a woman's glove. Made in the settlements, too. Look." The Swallow turned the gauntlet back, exposing the neat rows of stitches—machine stitches.

Tyrrell's eyes narrowed, staring at the gaudy thing of caribou skin, beads and dyed porcupine quills. If the Swallow was right it meant that the Indians or Eskimos—whichever they were—were in communication with the settlements. Beads did not grow in the Barrens. But a woman? That was odd. He stuffed the glove back in his pocket.

"All right, Phillipe" he ordered curtly, "we'll break camp and paddle down to the mouth of the river. May be natives there."

The Indian emptied the remainder of the tea billy on the little fire and reached for the frying pan. Suddenly he halted, eyes glazed.

"Hola!" The warning came in a soft hiss.

TYRRELL swung about at the sound, stared for a second, then came to his feet with a bound. Clearly outlined against the dark boles of the spruce was a figure, a white figure! His mind jumped back to the dying musk-ox. The ranger's rifle was in his hand with one sweep. With the weapon at the hip he started forward toward the newcomer.

Instead of retreating the woodland walker left the shelter of the timber and advanced directly toward the fire. Tyrrell heard a low laugh from the Indian behind him. He stopped and dropped the butt of the rifle to the ground, waiting. The stranger was unarmed, he could see; entirely unafraid apparently. The slim figure gradually took shape. It was a boy. No wonder Phillipe laughed when he had grabbed the rifle! The ranger's eyes narrowed.

"Great God!" he muttered, amazement holding him. The youth advancing so unconcernedly was a girl.

"A white girl!" he whispered to himself wonderingly. "A white girl, of all things; here in the heart of the Barrens, a thousand miles from nowhere!"

"What are you doing here?"

A low, defiant voice brought Tyrrell out of his reverie with a start. Words failed him. He gazed with frank astonishment at the girl. His eyes roved over her slim frame, from the two thick plaits of golden hair, which fell over her breast, to the little feet encased in snow-white moccasins. She wore nothing but a thin undershirt, that clung damply to her rounded body, and a white, deerskin skirt that failed to reach the knees. The slim arms and legs were bare. Her skin was tanned to a healthy brown. A wisp of a thing she was; her shining head did not reach to the ranger's shoulder. The full red lips were drawn into a firm line. Clear brown eyes looked up at Tyrrell fearlessly.

"Well?" She shot the single word at him impatiently, stamping her foot. Tyrrell laughed softly at the arrogant pose.

"Pardon me," he apologized. "I never expected such a thing up here."

His eyes roved over her again. The ranger had not seen a white woman for six months, and the girl was lovely. A faint flush mantled the olive of her cheeks.

"You're lacking in manners," she snapped, resentful eyes blazing. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Just what I was going to ask you," he shot back, a shade of annoyance in his tone. A regular little wildcat, he thought to himself. Aloud he said, "My name is Norman Tyrrell. I belong to the Wild Life section of the North West Territories government. I may say that I have police and magistrate's authority over the territory east of the Yellowknife hunting reserve. I ask again what you are doing here."

"Oh, you have—" The girl stopped suddenly. "That is my particular business!" she ended crisply, brown eyes flaming, still conscious of the ranger's steady stare. "I am not in the habit of discussing my affairs with strangers. We are camped across the point. Perhaps dad will satisfy your curiosity. I won't!"

"Whew!" Tyrrell whistled as she whirled about, the thick braids of her spun gold hair almost striking him. She strode off, without looking backward.

"Stay here 'till I get back, Phillipe," Tyrrell instructed the Indian. The grin left the other's face, as the ranger turned to him. He grunted, rolled over on his back, stretching lazily. Tyrrell dropped

his rifle, and set out after the white figure disappearing through the trees. He found the faint path that led through the timber. It was deliciously cool under the shade of the great trees. The woodland sounds filled his ears with pleasant melodies; the drone of flies, a squirrel's chattering, chick-a-dees noisily hunting insects on the resinous branches overhead.

MORE rapidly than he expected, the forest gave way to sudden light. He found himself standing on the shores of a sheltered, grassy bend. A log cabin stood in the center, white smoke spiralling from a mud chimney. The girl was just entering. She paused a moment, looking back. Tyrrell noted the disdainful flirt of the glossy braids as she disappeared.

"Little wildcat!" he laughed to himself again.

A man came to the door as Tyrrell's soft footsteps sounded in the swishing grass. He was middle-aged and thick-set. As if copying his daughter's mode, he, too, wore a thin undershirt, his lower limbs being clothed in moosehide trousers, "stagged off" midway between knee and thigh. His eyes were light blue. They were either shifty or watery, behind the colored glasses he wore; Tyrrell could not determine which.

"Come on in, Mr. Tyrrell," he greeted cordially enough, extending a hand. "Virginia told me who you were and your mission up here. What can we do for you?"

The ranger followed him, eyes sweeping the low cabin as he entered. In a flash he picked up the pole bunks, covered with skins. There were some fish spears, and two long, white bows hanging on the walls, a rough cupboard constructed of hewn boards; nothing more.

The girl was sitting on one of the bunks, brown legs swinging, a scornful expression on her small face. She stared unwinkingly at Tyrrell.

All at once the ranger's eyes narrowed; hot words came to his lips, only to be choked back. In one hand the girl held a white caribou skin glove! She slapped with it heedlessly against a bare knee. Even in the hall light of the cabin the beads and porcupine quills flickered. It was an exact duplicate of the one in his side pocket. Tyrrell turned to the man.

"I want to know what you are doing here," he said bruskly.

Glances passed between the girl and her father.

"Well, to clear away any misunderstanding I had better tell you, I suppose," the man grumbled after a pause. "My name is John Temple. I am a professor of zoology at Harvard university and came up here partly for the purpose of studying the flora and fauna of the Barren Lands, partly to regain my health. That accounts for our simple life." The man indicated his own scanty garments and the almost bare cabin. "Nothing like getting close to nature," he added smilingly.

Tyrrell ignored the friendly tone.

"Are you interested in the musk-ox herds?" He put the question abruptly. Temple's eyelids flickered.

"Certainly," he replied, after a moment's thought. "I am interested in all forms of wild life."

"Then no doubt your investigation of the yearling musk-ox across the river was entirely to your satisfaction, eh?" Tyrrell's eyes were hard. He jerked the glove out of his pocket and tossed it across the cabin. The girl leaped off the bunk and picked it up from the hard earthen floor.

"My glove! Where did you—"

"Lying beside the dead musk-ox. Where else did you expect?"

His voice was thin, sarcastic. Tears of sudden passion sprang up into her eyes. She leaped forward like a demented fairy, slashing wildly at Tyrrell's face with the gaudy thing.

"That's a lie! A lie! A lie!" she screamed at him.

The ranger caught the slim, brown arms in his strong hands and held her from him, looking down into the blazing eyes, at the row of even white teeth biting her red lip.

Her little white moccasins rattled against his shins.

"You little wildcat!" he chuckled—aloud this time. There was nothing harsh about the tone. He was amused.

"Virginia! Vi! Vi!"

Temple brushed forward and caught his daughter by the shoulders. Tyrrell relaxed his grip, to see the brown arms go about the old man's neck, the golden

head buried on his heavy shoulder.

"I have no further information for you, Mr. Tyrrell. Kindly leave us." Temple's voice was trembling.

"I'm going," Tyrrell replied curtly. "Sorry to have to say it, but you must consider yourselves under open arrest. You'll hear from me as soon as I have investigated this matter thoroughly."

As he reached the door there was the sound of a commotion from behind him. Whizz! The glove sailed through the air past his head.

The ranger picked it up again, and stuffed it in his pocket, chuckling to himself.

II

TYRRELL reached the end of the path through the woods, passed through the fringing alders, and so out upon the narrow beach.

His eyes swept the red rocks, glinting in the sun against the dark green of the forests and passed on to the roaring river. A crackling curse rose to his lips. The canoe was gone.

Treachery! He knew it now. Ever since leaving the settlement on Artillery lake the ranger had sensed a change in the Swallow.

"Ungrateful dog!" he muttered to himself. "Paid for his schooling at the mission; brought him up like a white man, and now this! Once an Indian always an Indian. The damn cur's taken all the gear and gone back to the wilderness life. I'm in one hell of a jack-pot!"

He squatted down on the rocks to think the thing over as calmly as possible, staring at the rushing river. Something caught his eye across the dead camp-fire. He rose to his feet and stepped over. Sticking upright in the ground was a small forked stick, with another laid across the crotch.

"Oh, that's it!" he grunted. The reading of the sign was plain. "Camp a short distance to the south."

What was behind it, though? He peered down at the trail stick and suddenly dropped on his hands and knees to stare at the ground, following along to where the nose of the canoe had been pulled up on the narrow fringe of sand. Moccasin tracks. A score of them. They led along the beach, and up-stream in the direction to which the trail stick pointed. Tyrrell knew that no canoe could be forced up against that current. The men, whoever they were, had tracked the craft from ashore with a line.

"Well, where any man can go in this country, I can," he told himself. "Anyhow there's nothing else for it." The ranger turned and followed the moccasin pads along the strip of beach.

HERMAN SCARTH'S trading post was built for business; the picturesque made no appeal to him. It was a low log cabin of a single, long room, one wall lined with rough pole shelves, crowded with showy packages likely to appeal to the drab lives of the northern natives. The opposite wall was furnished with odd garments hung on wooden pegs, snowshoes, fish spears, Eskimo bows and dog whips. One end was occupied by a great mud and stone fireplace, the other by a lopsided door and a gauze-covered window.

With his head in his hands, Phillipe the Swallow crouched on a bale of furs. The red-shirted giant's hand fell on his shoulder again, and the greasy, moon-faced Eskimos slumped about the walls leaned forward expectantly, black eyes snapping. In the far north cruelty comes as a matter of course; a sign of mastery. a break in the monotony, a pleasing interlude.

"Goin' to put you wise now, kid," Scarth rumbled. "Don't aim to hurt your boss none, 'less he starts anythin', but this old bozo Temple's got to be put outa the way. You an' Riskin' here's attend to him. I got plans of me own, though, about that there little spitfire. She needs tamin', an' I guess little Herman's the boy to do it, eh?"

The Swallow, cold-blooded Indian though he was, shivered at the tone.

We're into a swell musk-ox country here," the trader went on. "Nothing to beat it this side of Back's river. Come next summer we aims to build us some big skin boats and head down the Thelon to Hudson's Bay, an' then over to the Danish settlements. No questions asked

there. Big money. You'll get your whack, too."

Scarth listened for a moment to the booming of the Nemitano's rushing waters joining with those of the Nootooquak.

"Whist! What's that? There go the dogs. Guess that's him. Mind now; watch your step, an' act natural, or—" His iron fingers dug into the youth's shoulders significantly.

The trader swung over to the open doorway, peering down the rocky slope to the spruce that fringed the Nemitano. He laughed to himself at the haste with which Tyrrell's muscular legs carried him in long leaps from rock to rock.

Snarling and snapping, the Estikos' curly-tailed Arctic coast huskies were pouring down the slope toward the oncoming man; a ferocious wave of tawny yellow. Red tongues extended and wolf ears pricked, they volleyed straight at Tyrrell. This was a good test of nerves, Scarth knew. He grinned to himself as the ranger halted momentarily, then continued on his way.

The wave of dogs broke about the stranger, snarling and howling, lips drawn back from their long fangs. Those of the real north know that the huskie is a far more dangerous animal than his half-brother, the wolf.

Tyrrell slowed to a walk. The dogs, ready to tear at anything exhibiting the least fear, fell away from him. Generations of savage beating had endowed them with the knowledge of mastery. They sensed it now, and before the ranger reached the door they were once more snapping at each other; fighting for cool places under the shadow of the post walls.

"Howdy, Tyrrell," Scarth rumbled casually, extending a great, hairy paw. His close-set eyes roved over the ranger appraisingly; took in the broad shoulders, the slim waist, the sinewy arms exposed by the chopped-off sleeves.

Tyrrell ignored the hand.

"What the devil do you think you're up to, Scarth?" he shot out, cold blue eyes searching the other's face. "I want to know what you mean by lifting my canoe!"

"Shucks, Tyrrell, don't be so damned hostile over nothing. We was coming up the Nootooquak, seen your kid, an' figured you could do with a few square feeds. Ain't had no word from the 'outside' for three months, an' aimed to pump you for news, that's all. The boy allowed as how you could get around a few messes of genuine beans. We gotta make the most of what company there is up here, ain't we? You saw the trail sign, eh? No deception, as they usta say in the vodaville acts. Haw-haw!"

SCARTH placed a paw on Tyrrell's shoulder. The gesture was deliberate but friendly. His fingers felt the rippling muscles under the other man's shirt before the ranger shook the hand off. Tyrrell well knew that Scarth was trying him out. He talked too much, for one thing.

"That's all right, Scarth. Where's the boy and my gear? I'm not looking for any free accommodation; the government pays its way."

The trader nodded to the cabin, looked about him, stepped closer to the ranger.

"Look-a-here, Tyrrell, got somethin' to put you wise to."

"Shoot it!" Tyrrell made no attempt to conceal his dislike of the man.

"Say, you're ridin' the high horse, ain't you? Well anyhow, this is your business. I'll tell you, an' then you can do what you damn well like. I allus aims to be friendly with white men up here, but I don't lick no guy's boots. No, sir."

Tyrrell made no reply, still looking at him level-eyed, hands in his pockets.

"There's rustlin' of muskies goin' on here," Scarth threw out impressively, watching the other's eyes. "You don't need to look at me like that, I ain't doin' it. But I know who is."

"Who?" A single, crisp word.

"Old man Temple an' that saucy jane of his'n."

"Scarth, you must prove that!" Tyrrell kept his voice level by an effort.

"Provin' is right, Tyrrell. I'm not talkin'. Goin' to show you, by God! Goin' to prove what I say, an' then you'll shift these two outa the musk-ox country, or I'll find out why you don't from the Mounted Police at Fort Reliance. That's plain talk, eh?"

"Keep your threats to yourself, Scarth; they don't impress me. Prove what you

say and I will take the necessary action. My mission here is to protect the musk-ox herds. I'm going to do that, irrespective of persons; you or anyone else." The ranger stressed the *you*.

"Jake with me! You kin stand a ramble over the rocks for a few hours, eh?" Scarth queried sneeringly.

"I can go anywhere you can." Tyrrell's tone was still coldly contemptuous.

"All right. Come on." The trader turned and bellowed toward the cabin, "Hey you, Lafe! Goin' over to the valley with Tyrrell. Back in a coupla hours."

A muffled reply from the shack. The ranger glanced in as he passed. The Swallow still sat humped up on the fur bale, his gay red sash a splash of futile bravery against the gloom.

Tyrrell's face was set in a frown as he strode on after Scarth toward the crest of the ridge.

III

THE wind-swept Barrens filled the eye with desolate monotony. To all points of the compass they reached, rolling, brown granite hills slashed with boulder-strewn, graveled valleys. Here and there coarse grass and dwarfed bushes fought for life in the gullies where the ever-present winds had accumulated a few pockets of loose soil.

Behind the two men was the faint, black rim of the woods merging the Nootooquak—the timber line. East, West, North was nothing but the howling wilderness sweeping to the steely blue of the horizon.

On the earth and in the air nothing moved. Though he was well used to the Barren Lands, whenever he left the shelter of the friendly timber and struck out across the Arctic plains, their empty, forbidding desolation struck a chill to Tyrrell's heart. A God-forsaken wilderness. Here at least the title fitted.

Scarth traveled fast, his long legs eating up the miles. Time and again he broke into a jog trot, looking over his shoulder at the ranger. Tyrrell sensed that Scarth was still trying him out for some unknown reason of his own. The ranger allowed no indication of fatigue to escape him. His muscles were cramped with many weeks' canoe paddling, whereas the Barrens had known Scarth's feet month after month.

The trader headed north into the teeth of the winds whistling down from the Arctic coast. Suddenly he disappeared from view. Tyrrell loped forward to where he had last seen him, and glimpsed the trader's red mackinaw shirt below. He was following a narrow gulley that led downward at a sharp incline. Scarth had stopped; was waving a red arm.

The trader spoke for the first time since they had left the post. A triumphant grin split his face. He pointed downward.

"That's what we calls a little bit of heaven in this neck of the woods," he laughed. He paused, waved his hand again. "Allow me to introduce you to old man Temple's musk-ox ranch!"

A gasp of surprise escaped Tyrrell. He stepped past the trader and found himself on the brink of a mile-wide valley. For five years he had traveled the Barrens, winter and summer, but had never heard it mentioned by brown man or yellow; it was ignored in the stories and sagas of the Indians. Even looking at it now he could not reconcile his mind to its actual being.

Red cliffs ran down sheerly to a vivid green sward. Through this a flashing stream meandered, zig-zagging. Willow clumps dotted the meadows. Back of them were groves of poplars, their white stems gleaming against the bare rock walls. Here and there the dark black-green of the spruce clumps broke the dense light-green foliage of the cottonwoods.

Tyrrell took it all in with one sweeping glance. Then he turned to the other with a curt gesture inviting enlightenment.

"Step over this way a piece," Scarth invited. "Now look down. Yes, right below you."

Again Tyrrell gasped. Under their feet at the bottom of the sheer wall was a cabin roof. From where he stood the ranger could have tossed a stone on to it.

"That's Temple's cabin," Scarth exulted. "Professor Temple, wild-life investigator, he calls himself. Temple, the musk-ox rustler *I* calls him. Cabin out on the river's a blind. The two of 'em is here most of the time."

Tyrrell nodded. He would admit noth-

ing until he had proved it for himself.

"Enh, enh!" he grunted, Indian fashion. "Go ahead; shoot the rest of it."

Scarth laughed; a booming roar that echoed back from the rock walls.

"You're damned whistlin' I will. Look there to the north. You see the valley has a blind end. All right. Now look to the east. What do you see, eh?"

The ranger followed his pointing finger. He saw that the valley walls tapered to a narrow passage hardly wider than a barn door. Across this had been tumbled a mass of spruce and poplar trees, completely blocking the one means of exit.

"All shut in, eh?" Scarth queried. "Know the reason why? No! I'll show you. Get around this point. Mind your step, too."

Tyrrell edged out on the ledge behind the trader and looked at a wide bay, where the valley flattened out into a great green meadow. On it, in large bands and isolated groups were hundreds of musk-oxen.

The ranger knew that Scarth was not lying. Even at this distance he could see the sun shining on the gracefully curved horns, could plainly discern the long hair, reaching almost to the animals' feet.

"Not lyin' now, eh?" Scarth jeered, reading his thoughts. "Come on down and we'll leave our visitin' cards on the Professor. Then you can arrest him accordin' to the laws you're bein' paid to enforce. All right; turn round. There's a passage down here."

Tyrrell obeyed mechanically. If Temple were living in that cabin everything pointed to his guilt. He followed the other down the rocky defile, his mind in a whirl. They came to another barrier of felled timber, crawled over it, and stood on the edge of the green meadow.

Even yet the ranger could not bring himself to the thought that this was the heart of the wind-swept, icy Barrens. He walked along behind the trader over the springy grass, resolving the problem over and over in his mind.

"Hello, sweetness!"

SCARTH'S voice and a startled girl's cry brought Tyrrell out of his daze. They were standing in front of a rough log cabin, roofed with sods. It possessed only three walls, and was apparently just a summer shelter. Virginia Temple stood behind a bed of red coals glowing in the center of the earthen floor. A frying pan dropped unheeded from her hand into the fire. She jumped back, golden hair flashing in the evening sun, startled eyes great pools of light. Scarth ran his greedy eyes slowly over her slim frame. The girl winced at the look, turning nervously from one man to the other.

"All set to prance out on a roof garden, ain't she? Bare legs an' all! Heh, heh! Say, Tyrrell, the old beezers in the baldhead row would pop their eyes, eh?" Scarth laughed into the ranger's stony face. "Like to see the Professor," the trader went on, still eyeing the girl. "Want to arrest him. Where's he at?"

Virginia turned to Tyrrell, opened her mouth to speak, then brought her even white teeth down on the red lips.

"I'm tellin' the ranger here that your old man is a musk-ox rustler, little pink toes. Been showin' him the layout, an' pretty near got him convinced, but he's from Saint Louis all right. Goin' to show him your cache of skins now. Maybe that'll convince him."

"Skins? What do you mean?" the girl asked scornfully.

"Skins is right, dearie—"

"Look, Scarth, stop that kind of talk! Say what you've got to say, but in a different tone of voice," Tryrrell cut in, whirling on the trader, face drawn, eyes two narrow glints of light. The girl looked at him gratefully.

"Particular, ain't you?" Scarth sneered. "Skins is right," he went on. "Up in that little cave behind the cabin here, where you stows 'em until the dog team comes down from Coronation Gulf in the winter. Say girl, don't act so simple."

"I don't know what this man is talking about." Virginia appealed to Tyrrell.

"Aw, quit your kiddin'!" Scarth laughed. "Come on an' I'll show you."

The trader waved his arm toward the cliff wall behind the cabin, and started out. Tyrrell motioned Virginia to follow, falling in behind. They passed through a grove of nodding poplars, the ranger noting that they were following a newly blazed trail. Scarth pushed through a fringe of alders, pointing to a black hollow in the face of the cliff.

Tyrrell looked at him questioningly, then went forward. It was just a shallow depression, perhaps a dozen feet deep and as many high. Piled up in it almost to the jagged roof were a series of great bales bound with rawhide. The ranger bent forward to examine them, noted the thickness of the skins and the long hair. They were musk-ox hides.

A sudden feeling of nausea swept over him. He did not want to believe the old man and the girl guilty, but the evidence was plain.

"Guess I'll have to—"

His thoughts were cut short by a high-pitched wail.

"Oh! Help me! Help! Oh, you . . ."

A scene was photographed on Tyrrell's brain; a picture he never forgot. Legs braced, Scarth had picked the girl up. His great, tousled head was bent over her olive face, framed by its golden halo. Her brown legs kicked frantically, two little fists hammered uselessly on his face.

ONE of the great arms slipped up, pressing her closer. A roar of rage burst from Tyrrell. He threw himself through the air. Scarth dropped Virginia with an oath. She subsided on the ground in a huddled heap. In a second she was on her feet again screaming:

"He never did it! He never kissed me! The beast! The beast! Oh! Mr. Tyrrell, he said horrible things. Terrible things! Don't let him touch me again!"

"No I won't." Simple words came hissing through Tyrrell's clenched teeth. "Scarth, in my country I've seen men killed for that. I'm going to teach you that you can't act like a savage, even in the Barrens. Put up your hands."

The ranger's blue eyes shot flames. He pulled off his short mackinaw jacket, without taking his eyes from Scarth's face.

"Aw, shut up! I'm going to keep the girl anyhow. She's nothing but a—"

Crack! Tyrrell's open palm caught him across the mouth, cutting off the words. The ranger followed it with a left uppercut that rocked the trader's head on his shoulders. The little glade under the quivering poplars resounded with the thud of fists, short stabbing breaths, the girl's frightened cries.

It did not last long. Tyrrell heard those wails; knew what he was fighting for.

"All right, ease up! I've got enough!" Scarth panted through bruised lips. "Ain't such a damned fool as to get all messed up for nothin'. More cards in the deck yet," he grunted with a sickly grin. Great chest heaving, he took one step forward toward the girl. "I'll get you—"

Swish! Swish! Virginia leaped at Scarth like a lynx, striking him across the face with a broken branch.

Mouthing vile things, he stumbled forward, vainly endeavoring to grasp his tormentor. Tyrrell caught him by the shoulder, spinning him about. The two glared at each other without words.

Scarth's gaze passed Tyrrell, engulfing the girl. Then he turned and stumbled off.

There was a world of meaning in the trader's eyes. From Virginia's low whimper, Tyrrell knew that she understood full well.

IV

A CHORUS of savage howls greeted Scarth when he topped the rise and started down the rock slope for the post. A tawny wave of huskies broke around him. They snarled and whined, hating the trader as they hated all things that ran on two feet or four, but fearful to attack without the pack master's leap for the throat.

There was something in their relentless savagery that appealed to Scarth. One brute thrilled to the other.

"Make short work of me if I slipped," the trader ruminated, looking around him at the baying circle, at the flickering ears and long, wolfish snouts.

He started to go forward again, suddenly stopped, and wheeled on the encircling pack. His splotched face lighted.

"By God, yes. That'll fix him!" he muttered.

He swung one great fist into his palm with a resounding thwack that sent the nearest dogs tumbling backward, snapping at each other. The trader hurried down the slope, chuckling to himself.

The howling of the dogs brought a mob of men rushing to the door, the Eskimos' narrow black eyes peering at him out of oily faces. They made no sign, however;

the trader's battered face apparently went unnoticed. Scarth shoved them aside, calling, "Riskin! Riskin!"

"Here!"

The other man jumped from his skin couch at the command, hastily covering a snicker with a yawn. He too failed to notice his chief's battered face. Scarth was brief.

"Get this Lafe! Take Kooyuk Killik to run the huskies into the dog pit. No fish, mind! Wants 'em in good huntin' shape for the mornin'. They'll get fed then."

Riskin knew. Cold-blooded brute though he was, he shivered at the thought. He choked down his revulsion, grinned understanding at Scarth, and roared in the Innuit tongue at the Eskimos. Scarth wheeled.

"Here," he threw out at the Indian. "Got a job for you. Listen, Swallow an' make sure you get it right." His great fingers dug into Phillipe's shoulders. "Take Tyrrell's canoe and drop down to old man Temple's cabin on the Nootooquak. You gotta hour of daylight yet. Make out you're through with us, see? Hand him a soft line. I wants him outa the way 'till I fixes Tyrrell, an' grabs this here skirt."

The Swallow nodded. Scarth's eyes were burning into his.

"All right, boy. You tells the old beezer that we got this ranger guy an' the girl, an' is takin' 'em across country to Caribou Lake. Let him go there or any other damn place he likes; it don't matter so long's he's outta the way for a few days."

"But the Mounted Police—"

"Dry up! Mounted Police nothing. Detachment's pulled out from Fort Reliance. None of them red-jacketed shysters nearer than Fort Resolution. Take six weeks to get there an' back. Go on. Get moving." Scarth relaxed his grip on the Indian's shoulder; gave him a push that sent him stumbling through the doorway.

The trader waited until he saw the boy carrying the birchbark down to the river. Then he turned to where the Eskimos were shouting and flinging long-lashed whips at the yelping dogs.

ROSY dawn was flecking the red granite walls of the valley with purple tints when Tyrrell roused from his doze. The sun glistened on the dew-wreathed poplar leaves, quivering in the light morning air, drawing sweet, earthly smells from the rich valley bottom.

Through the low-hanging ground mist the hulking shapes of the musk-oxen loomed dimly; moving mounds of life, slowly following the course of the little stream where the grass was richest. Above him a red-headed woodpecker tapped steadily at a dead log. Whirring wings and soft quacking betokened that the wild ducks were taking a morning flight before settling down for the day's nosings through the reeds.

"Lord!" Tyrrell said.

The ranger moved stiffly. His legs ached from the sitting posture he had maintained during the night; his back felt as though the rough log walls had cut through to his lungs.

He looked down at the girl's golden head nestling against his shouder, at the parted lips, the steady rise and fall of her bosom. The slim arms were curled against his breast, the rounded legs doubled up under his coat. A lump rose in Tyrrell's throat.

All at once he stiffened, shook Virginia gently. She stirred, opened her eyes, smiled up at him, then snuggled closer like a sleepy kitten.

"You won't let him take me, Norman." It was an assertion rather than a query.

"No, dear."

For a moment the long lashes opened again, and the brown arms went about his neck. She held her pouting lips up to him frankly. Tyrrell kissed her hotly, crushing her to him.

The girl sighed deeply.

"Come, Virginia; we must be going. Every moment counts if we are to get to your father's cabin in time. Scarth will not remain inactive long."

The girl shivered at the mention of the name. Tyrrell lowered her gently, and rose to his feet, stretching and flexing his aching muscles. She came to him again, hands on his sinewy wrists, brown eyes fixed confidingly upon his face.

"I must tell you everything before we go," she said in a low voice. "Something may—may—happen to either of us, and I want you to know the truth."

"No!" he shot out, sweeping her up into

his arms. "What does it matter now, little one? Nothing matters but that I love you."

He held her tightly a long moment. "This is madness, Virginia." Sudden realization came to him. "No, we won't wait another second," he replied in answer to her gesture toward the fire hole. "Come."

She gazed about her, then put her hand trustingly in his. Without looking back they passed up the gully leading to the crest, and struck across the Barrens to the east.

"No, not that way," the girl checked him. "There's a big lake there. I know the direction; dad and I traveled it time and again. I can run too, Norman. Let's play at a race. Come on, you old slow-coach!" she laughed back at him.

Virginia started off at a trot, brown legs flashing, the sun striking gold from her flying braids.

"Thank God for your courage, little girl," Tyrrell murmured to himself, loping off after the dancing figure. They mounted one red rock ridge after another, crossing chasm-like, gravel-filled valleys where the sharp flints stabbed through the tough hide of the moose-hide moccasins.

Always Virginia trotted ahead, smiling back at him. On each ridge-crest Tyrrell halted a split second to look back, so the girl could not see the expression of anxiety upon his face. Distance—mellowed sounds floated to him time and again on the thin air of the treeless wilderness.

"The dogs!" He nodded grimly. Realization of Scarth's cold-blooded ruthlessness did not stir him. He had expected this—or worse. Tyrrell gazed eagerly ahead. On the horizon was a faint blue line. The trees fringing the river, he knew. Virginia was still padding along steadily.

"She must not know! She must not know!" He repeated it over and over; a soundless chant.

The girl disappeared over another rolling rock ridge. Tyrrell stopped at once, gazing back over the undulating Barrens, under eyeshaded hands.

"Oh, God help her now!"

The words came to dry lips. Black figures showed momentarily against the cold blue of the sky-line; a dozen men, bent forward, running hard. Ahead of them raced a score of the Eskimo huskies. Tyrrell caught the waving of the bushy tails before they were lost to sight again.

HE dashed over the ridge. All at once his face went sickly white. Virginia was down, golden head bent, shoulders quivering, holding one little white moccasin in both hands, rocking back and forth.

"Vi! Vi! What—"

"Oh, Norman! My foot. Oh, it hurts!"

"Quick! On my back." Tyrrell caught the girl up, and swung her across his shoulders.

Carrying clearly on the rare air the hunting cry of the wolf-dogs came to the fugitives. Virginia knew! Tyrrell felt her arm tighten about him, heard her sobbing intake of breath. He raced up out of another valley to the crest. No time to look back now.

"Tell me, Vi," he panted.

"Oh, they're coming, Norman!"

"How far?" A sharp, incisive query.

"Perhaps half a mile. No, no! Less than that!"

Again echoed the chorus of savage howls.

Scattered trees were beginning to appear. The timber line was no longer a faint blur. Tyrrell's aching eyes could make out the black stems of the spruce trees beyond the scattered jackpines. He measured the distance as his bursting lungs drove him forward. A mile to the shelter of the woods, perhaps less.

Would the old man fight if they succeeded in reaching the cabin in time? Temple had not impressed the ranger as a strong type. He remembered seeing nothing but the two bows in the shack. Had the man a rifle? Would the girl's father be there? If not— He put the thought aside.

Above the feathery dark-green spruce tops he could dimly make out gaunt, whitish branches. Balm of Gilead trees. That meant water. They must be within reach of the river now.

Another ridge crest. Without stopping Tyrrell half-turned his head. The hunters were in full view. The ranger could clearly see the fog of breath from the dogs' red mouths, the white parkas of the leading Eskimos as they were tugged along by the pack masters on the leashes. The loose dogs raced ahead of the other animals, only to turn again, baying at the leaders in a frenzy of excitement.

A sudden choking sob from Virginia. Her arms relaxed. She had fainted.

A stinging curse arose to Tyrrell's lips. He stopped for a moment, twisted about, threw her up into his arms, and staggered forward again.

The baying was coming closer and closer. Above the drumming of his heart the sounds came distinctly now. Tyrrell raced on as in a dream. Stinging branches struck him unheeded. Unconsciously his woodland-trained feet cleared the straggling roots and the brash of the forest floor.

The woods echoed with the howling of the dogs; human voices too, shouting encouragement. The dark forest seemed peopled with demons of another world.

The slapping branches vanished. Light! Through a red mist Tyrrell saw a faint shape ahead; a friendly shape. The cabin.

His feet were on the swishing grass now. Pausing for what seemed an age, he passed the limp girl to his other arm, and bounded on.

A sudden burst of high-pitched howls thundered on his ear drums like lead. His mind was almost a blank. The hunters had broken from the woods.

The cabin. The cabin! It excluded all other thoughts. A hundred yards now and—

Cr-ack! Cr-ack! Cr-ack!

Bullets whined past Tyrrell's ears. He did not hear them. The cabin! The cabin!

Phillipe the Swallow threw up the rifle again. Another crack reverberated from the rock walls across the river. Another huskie turned a somersault.

From the edge of the forest came a wild chorus of yells in Eskimo mingled with booming curses in English. Phillipe saw the men clubbing at the dogs and laughed to himself.

Something was on the ground; wounded. There was blood. Killing! Every fibre in the huskies' wicked natures thrilled to it. More yelps and howls. A flourish of yellow tails, tawny backs straining, and the pack was tearing at its comrades' throats.

The Swallow jumped back into the doorway, dropped the pole bar across it, blew the smoke out of the Winchester, and jerked open the magazine. Behind him he heard Tyrrell's whistling lungs, the girl's sobbing.

V

PHILLIPE ran quickly around the cabin, tearing the almost transparent caribou skins from the windows. His vision could sweep the clearing on all sides of the little log building now.

The rustlers were still cursing and slashing at the fighting dogs. It would not last long, the Indian knew. Dog fights were part of his life; it would be over in a minute. Then Scarth's men would launch an attack of some kind.

A touch on his shoulder. The Swallow turned to look into Tyrrell's drawn face. Their hands met in silence.

"I could not forget the old days, my master," the Indian said simply, eyes downcast. He raised his face suddenly to the other's. A light shone in his eyes. He spoke rapidly. "We of the North know when the Gods of the Shadow Hills call. My feet are turned to the long trail that leads to the end of things, and I am glad, for I will not go alone."

Tyrrell, knowing the Indian nature, made no attempt to stop the boy. Soft steps pattered. He felt Virginia's hand steal into his. Still looking beyond at the darkening forest, the Indian went on:

"I was false; it was the fear that always runs in the Indian blood. I am an Indian, though you tried to make me a white man. Listen! I talk like an Indian. We always go back. Nothing can change the ways of the Chipewyans. The spirits of the Windigo beckon and we must obey. We must obey." He paused a moment, shook himself, turning to face Tyrrell and the girl. "Time passes. I must speak quickly. Behold, my master, all of this is Scarth's doing. The glove which you found beside the musk-ox yearling was placed there by Riskin. It was stolen from this cabin. The hides which you found in the cave in the valley were carried there from the post by Scarth's men. Some I myself carried and—"

"A-ah!" A long-drawn sigh from the girl. The Indian heard it and stopped speaking. He motioned to Virginia. She glanced at Phillipe gratefully. "Norman, I am glad of this; glad that it came from other lips than mine. What he says must be true. Dad has no interest in the things of the wilderness except as a scientist. He

was sent up here by the faculty of Harvard to study the wild life of the Barren; nothing else."

"Well, why in God's name didn't you tell me that, Vi?"

"Oh, you were so snuffy. Then you called me a wildcat and all sorts of—"

Tyrrell's arm tightened. A faint smile crossed his face.

"Very well, dear. Go ahead quickly. I want to know all. We have no time to lose."

"I know what you are thinking about, Norman. The valley. It is true that we paid Scarth's Eskimos to drive musk-oxen in there, and it is true that they blocked the valley outlets on dad's orders. But it was simply a convenient method for observing the animals closely. I always wondered about Scarth, but I know now. He wanted us out of the way so that he could kill off all the rest of the herds and—"

Cr-ack! A sudden deafening boom filled the cabin. The Swallow had been watching. He jerked an empty shell out of the breech, and pumped the Winchester again. As the shot sounded white moccasins flashed in the air. A figure toppled back into the bush.

The girl clung to Tyrrell. No one spoke. Swift realization of their plight flooded three brains anew.

Clug, clug, clug, clug! The Indian turned the rifle over, jerking the shells out on the floor. Immediately he crammed them back into the magazine again, and turned to look up at Tyrrell. Four shells. The ranger understood the message. He followed the Swallow's quick nod. The other rifle was in the canoe.

Four shells! Virginia gasped. Her face blanched, she pulled Tyrrell's head level with her own, whispering. He understood, kissed her gently, and straightened.

"Phillipe, you must keep one shell for—"

WORDS failed him. He bit his lips to choke back the sob that rose in his throat. The Swallow looked at the girl, and then back to the woods again. He voiced a low, *"enh, enh!"* Yes, he would keep one shell.

He raised the rifle, finger stiffening on the trigger. Dim figures were moving, slowly circling the cabin, keeping far back in the shelter of the trees. Occasionally a huskie appeared, to merge abruptly with the shadows.

"They've split up," the Indian announced over his shoulder. "Two or three parties of them, and they've separated the dogs."

A thousand wild plans chased across the ranger's brain, only to be rejected. They were trapped. He well knew that though the rustlers were not armed the dogs would pull them down long before they reached the canoe.

In the silence of the cabin he heard Virginia's heart beating against his, felt the tremulous rise and fall of her bosom as she clung to him.

The moon was rising, flecking the tops of the feathery spruce with faint light. Dimly he made out the sheer cliffs across the river, the level grass reaching down to the yellow water, the faint blur which he knew was the canoe. He measured the distance from the cabin, then to the timber. It was useless. Virginia felt his body slacken.

Silence. Three pairs of eyes eagerly searched the fringe of the timber. Nothing stirred, but behind that black barrier they sensed that the eyes of the Frozen Plains were watching them.

Claws rattled on the branching boughs of the long-limbed spruce that swept over the cabin. The slight sound of some disturbed animal—lynx or squirrel—came to them distinctly, seeming to fill the air with its volume.

They waited in strained silence. Something was coming.

"Hey!"

All at once it came—a coarse voice booming down out of the air. Tyrrell jumped for one window, the Swallow for another. They peered up, but could see nothing except the tracery of the spruce branches against the lightening sky, and little puffy clouds floating across the moon.

"Hey! In the shack there!"

Scarth's voice. Tyrrell steadied his nerves.

"Well?" he called.

"It's not 'well' for you by the hell of a long shot," came the rumbled reply. "Say, Tyrrell wanta talk to you. Hear me? All right, I'm up in the tree over the cabin. Slick idear, eh? Can't take a crack at me here. Guess you ain't got any too many shells, anyhow."

The ranger waited, beckoning Phillipe to withdraw from the other window.

"I'll have you talkin' in a minnit," Scarth's voice went on, a note of triumph in it. "We got you guys cooped up. Get that in your nuts. Dogs all round in the trees, cravin' a feed. Here's news for the skirt! The venerable old Professor got as far as the mouth of the river. Bust his canoe. Some strong silent man of the great open spaces, that old beezer, as they says in the story books! Heh-heh-heh! Sittin' on the rocks down there wringin' his hands—"

A wail of dismay broke from Virginia, and floated up to the man in the tree. He laughed again.

"That you, Missis Scarth? Poor old Pop won't be here to give the bride away, will he? Never mind; hubby'll take care of you—"

A frenzied oath burst from Tyrrell. He wrested the rifle out of the Swallow's hands, thrust his body out of the window, and fired at the sound of the voice. *Zee-ep!* The bullet whined harmlessly through the branches.

Phillipe jerked him back, tugging the rifle out of the infuriated ranger's hands.

"Three! Three! Three!" he whispered. Tyrrell nodded and stamped back and forth, swinging his arms.

"Rotten shot," Scarth commented coolly. "Say, I'm not doin' the human target act up here anyway. Want to talk business. We'll make a deal. You, the old guy down the river, an' that sanctified mission Indian of yours can beat it t'hell outta here. I'll keep the girl. How's that?"

His voice was lost in the maddened rush Tyrrell made for the window, the Indian's jump that brought him cat-like on the ranger's back, and Virginia's wail of horror. For a second the cabin was a bedlam.

Tyrrell struck out wildly. The Swallow suffered the blows in mute agony, his legs and arms wrapped around the ranger's.

"Listen, in the name of the Great Manitou! Listen! Listen! We are saved! Listen, for God's sake!" Phillipe panted.

TYRRELL shook him off, eyeing him coldly, ready to strike him down. Perhaps this was more treachery. Anything was possible now. Woman's intuition came to Virginia, smothering the mental agony that was torturing her so terribly.

"Norman, do listen," she implored.

Tyrrell shook him off, still eyeing the Swallow. The Indian picked up the rifle and set it against the door. He bent forward, face shining eagerly.

"A great thought has come to me, my master. Listen well. We will do this thing. Thus, I will be the sacrifice. We are much of a likeness, the girl and I. I will go to Scarth, while you two run for the canoe. There will be time before that black devil—"

Phillipe the Swallow raised one hand aloft, following it with his eyes. Tyrrell knew the gesture. A warrior bound for the Happy Hunting Grounds.

"No!" Virginia and the ranger voiced the same thought.

The Swallow laughed. He was unwinding his long, scarlet waist sash; the old distinguishing mark of the voyageurs; the badge of honor handed down by generation to generation, from the first fur traders who drove the long canoes into the uncharted wilderness. He jerked off the sash, and pulled the fringed deerskin capote over his head.

Tyrrell caught Virginia by the shoulders, forcing her to obey him. In a few moments the exchange was made.

Scarth's voice boomed again.

"I'll get her anyhow. Answer yes or no. Think I'm goin' to squat here all night like a blasted chipmunk? What is it? Come on; spit it out!"

Tyrrell eyed the two others. They were almost of a height, both slim, boyish. In the moonlight the deception would probably work. But poor Phillipe—he'd bring the Mounties back from Fort Resolution and clean up this gang.

The ranger forced himself to action. He steadied his voice and called up, "Scarth, you win."

A gloating chuckle from the tree. Virginia shivered.

"Listen, Scarth," Tyrrell went on. "We're taking no chances with you. Stand at the edge of the timber, there to the East by the river. She will go to you. The boy and I will leave the cabin at the same time. One false move and I'll—"

"Save your wind, Tyrrell. Allus figured you was yellow an' a bluffer. Know it now. There'll be no move from the gang

unless you tries any funny stuff. I'm playin' fair. Be over there in a minnit."

The three in the doorway watched Scarth's hulking shape across the level grass. There was no sign of the others. The forest was black, still, silent. The trader turned and waved an arm.

"Phillipe, you are a great warrior. Some day our trails will cross again in the Country of the Shadow Hills, *Payak! Payak, namik!*" Tyrrell and the Indian gazed at each other eye to eye, hands clasped.

"Phillipe, good—"

Virginia's voice choked off suddenly in a sob. The Swallow patted her gently on the shoulder, looked once again at his master, and left the shelter of the cabin. Copying the girl's walk, he tripped daintily across the green glade toward his death.

"Come, dear. Be brave." Tyrrell picked up the rifle. Holding Virginia's hand tightly, they walked quickly toward the canoe.

A chorus of howls from the timber. Yells from the Eskimos. The Swallow rushed forward, and made a wild leap at Scarth. In a lightning flash Tyrrell saw the rustler draw back his arm. A slash, and the Indian toppled back.

THEY were running now, Tyrrell half-carrying, half-dragging the girl. Another twenty yards to the canoe! He could see the moon shining on the paddle in the nose of the little craft.

Scarth, howling curses, was running frantically to cut them off. From both sides the dogs bounded forward. The long hair quivered as they threw themselves through the air, filling the glade with hideous baying, drowning the wild shouts of the Eskimos.

Three shells! The words stood out on Tyrrell's brain in letters of fire. He stopped, held his gasping breath a second, and planted his feet.

Crack! A stabbing spurt of flame. He swung about. *Crack!* One shell now!

Two dogs rolled over kicking. On top of them piled the rest of the pack, snarling, howling, tearing.

The canoe! With one arm Tyrrell flung Virginia's limp form into the craft, and whirled about. Hands were clutching at him, staring black eyes gleaming above drawn lips. Hate was a naked flame.

Crunch! The stock of the rifle came down on a matted head with a sickening thud. Tyrrell swung again, missed, and hurled the weapon at the nearest face. One of his hands clutched the bow of the birchbark. A shove and she was floating.

The ranger leaped forward, the icy water splashing up to his waist. A shower of spray covered Virginia. She sat up.

"Oh!" One agonized cry and she was huddled down again, her golden head buried in her hands.

"Not so fast, you—"

Scarth's voice. Iron fingers tore at Tyrrell's shoulder; he felt himself being drawn back. Without turning, the ranger jerked the canoe out of the flood that was carrying her into the stream.

For a split second he relaxed his grip on the birchbark, tore himself free of the clutching fingers and whirled. With all the power of his six feet of bone and sinew he sent a crashing uppercut into Scarth's face.

Blood leaped to meet the impact of bone on bone. The rustler staggered back to his knees in the water. In a second he was scrambling up again.

A single leap and Tyrrell was in the canoe, paddle in hand. A desperate sweep, and the light vessel shot out into the river. The current caught her, swinging the canoe broadside on, despite all his efforts.

The roar of the torrent was in his ears. His head sang and his heart pounded in time to the frenzied plunging of the paddle.

"Oh! Look! Look! It's Phillipe!" Virginia was on her knees in the bow of the canoe, shooting up cascades of water.

For a fleeting second Tyrrell paused. Scarth was on his feet blundering toward the canoe, shooting up cascades of water. To his back clung a slim form, one hand clutching at the rustler's throat, the other striking wildly.

The current caught the struggling figures. A wild flurry of arms and they disappeared. Again they rose, to be swept out on the wicked current of the yellow river.

"Hola! Hola! Hola!"

As the birchbark swirled around the timbered bend Tyrrell caught the Swallow's joyous shout—an Indian's warrior's chant of victory.

LAST OF THE TUNDRA PHANTOMS

By E. L. CHICANOT

A half-million dollars waited in trust for the last of the Klondike's fugitive phantoms. And death lurked in deep shadows for Roger Kennedy as he pursued his relentless search of the five who had disappeared.

BEYOND the bog alders, at the edge of the brush, backed by the powdered deposit of the fall's first snow, stood the giant outline of a big bull moose, clearly discernible in the gray light of morning. Out in the lake beyond the fringe of alders, two men sat tense and motionless in a canoe, one in the stern, birch bark horn

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still in hand, steadying the craft, and the other in the prow, with rifle to shoulder and finger upon trigger, taking careful aim at the lordly creature their treacherous call had lured there, and which stood an easy mark, all unsuspecting.

But the finger never closed upon the trigger. Just as the marksman was about to send the deadly missile home there was the soft whine of a passing bullet close to him, followed by the report of the discharge of a rifle in the dim distance. With a single bound the moose was swallowed up in the brush. The man laid down his rifle in disgust.

"Well, I'm damned," he said, turning round to his companion. "Someone else had a bead on him and I though we were alone out here this morning. We certainly called him out. Well, he missed him anyway. Crazy to shoot at that distance. We may as well get back to breakfast. Our sport is over for the morning." He prepared to dip his paddle.

"Say," he added, pausing to turn again when the excitement of the moment had waned. "Why didn't he notice us here? That's pretty dangerous shooting. The bullet just pinged past my head."

He had scarcely finished speaking when there was the same soft, whining drone, seemingly at his very ear, and the same distant report of the discharge.

"By God! what's the fool up to. There's no sign of moose."

He picked up the paddle and was preparing to put it in the water when a third shot rang out. He blanched, ducked, and then began frantically to paddle in the direction of the shore, an example which his friend, in an equal state of alarm, was not slow to follow.

In less than two minutes they were out of the open water, through the alders, and had reached the lake shore. The first man stepped out with an audible sigh of relief and stood gazing across at the opposite shore. The other, steadying the canoe and collecting the rifles and paddles, heard a dull thud, followed by the echoing report of a rifle discharge, and looked up to find his companion sunk in an ugly heap.

In a wild panic of fear he stepped out of the alders seized the recumbent man by his canvas coat and dragged him roughly over the ground into the protecting brush. Safely screened by poplars and willows, he proceeded to make an examination of the limp body, but it required only an instant to determine that his worst fears were realized and that his friend was beyond his aid. He had apparently died instantaneously, without uttering a single word.

ROGER KENNEDY looked up from the corpse dazed and stupefied. It had all happened so suddenly and inexplicably. He was dumb with fear and crazed with anger. Who, in this wild country, could have sought Burton Symes' death, and why? It was so evidently intentional and planned. The assasin had waited through the morning until the motionless canoe had given him his opportunity. When they had made hastily for the shore he had desisted until Symes foolishly stood up and presented himself a target again. He had certainly been determined to get him.

It was all so like a horrid dream that he could scarcely think intelligently. He had believed this particular lake uninhabited save for themselves. For years they had been coming to this spot in the heart of Nova Scotia and never had there been the slightest mishap since the first occasion when he had induced his friend to come along and the latter had so astonished him with his knowledge of woodcraft and his expert handling of a canoe. He had enjoyed the subsequent annual trips so supremely, though contented to return to Cleveland where he was held in universal esteem and had a host of friends. If he possessed a solitary enemy in the city in which he had dwelt so long, none knew about it, and certainly there had never been the slightest reason to suppose that he had made one in these lone woods in which the two together spent a few weeks each fall. Yet plainly someone had been deliberately gunning for him and had succeeded in getting him.

With an effort he threw off the vague bewilderment hampering him. He must act and act quickly. The first thing to be done was to get the body back to the lodge miles away through numerous lakes. The second was to get on the track of the assassin. He toiled with the stiffening body and at length got it into the canoe and, taking his seat, pushed off. He momentarily expected a fresh discharge from the distant shore, but

nothing came to break the terrible stillness of the grim morning but the steady drip of water from the paddle.

It was a nightmare of a journey, each minute stretching out into a hideous hour. Early he placed his coat over his friend's face and bent more energetically to the paddle. It was nevertheless slow work with such a heavy and gruesome load. The way led through a chain of lakes and the larger bodies were churned into rough waves by the wind so that he had difficulty in navigating them. They were joined by narrows where there was scarce a ripple on the water and the willows met overhead and scraped his hat. All morning and afternoon he labored without rest, and it was quite dark when at length, at the end of the first lake, he saw the gleaming lights of the lodge in the distance.

His arrival at such an hour caused a ripple of excitement which accentuated at the sight of the prone, half-frozen figure in the canoe. The first assumption was that it had been a hunting accident, of which they had experienced a few before, and when Roger Kennedy had concluded his story he could feel the glances of suspicion which were directed at him. This was a phase of the situation for which he was totally unprepared, and it maddened him almost beyond utterance.

"Better say it was an accident," said one of the sportsmen in a knowing manner.

"Accident nothing," replied Kennedy hotly. "I'm telling you there has been a cold-blooded murder perpetrated. He was my friend and personally I won't rest until the whole thing is thoroughly investigated. It's up to the lodgekeeper to get the sheriff here as soon as possible."

Kennedy's indignation and grief were convincing enough, but nevertheless a certain air of skepticism characterized the little group as the members turned away and wandered back to the lodge. A boy was, however, despatched to find the sheriff.

THE sheriff, a grim and grizzled individual who was also the district fire ranger, came down during the night and in the morning listened to Roger's story without comment. He explained how, as a matter of precaution he had telephoned a general alarm over the forest service wire to the point of railroad contact, and suggested setting out immediately for the scene of the alleged crime. His attitude was noncommittal, but something occasional in his manner suggested his belief in the utter impossibility of murder on the part of an unknown person having taken place in that remote locality. A shooting accident he could understand. Also a man's desire to cover it up.

The two set out, paddled steadily all morning, and in the afternoon reached the lake which years of visiting had made familiar to Roger Kennedy. Rounding a peninsula he pointed out the spot, a cove hidden in box alders. The two landed and Roger led the sheriff to the blotch of blood where Symes had lain. The sheriff roamed around for some minutes but discovered nothing which was of the slightest aid. He came back and stood gazing out across at the other side of the lake.

"You reckon the shot came from over there?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it."

"Huh, aint nobody lives there, an' it's poor hunting ground. Wouldn't be no hunters there," evidently still following the same train of thought of another hunter's stray shot being responsible for the accident. "Anyhow we'll cross over an' see what we can find."

The other side of the lake was a wild region where light brush at the water's edge increased in size and density as it receded from the shore until, within sight of the eye, it became black, impenetrable forest. Arrived there, Kennedy and the sheriff moved along the edge examining the snow-covered ground. They had not proceeded fifteen minutes before they came across unmistakable tracks.

"Looks like a feller's bin walkin' round here with moccasins," the sheriff said.

He made a further examination and came to a halt at the base of a poplar.

"Here's something more. I guess you were right. Here's where the son-of-a-gun shot from. See the mark of the knee an' where the toe set. He's not a very big man, judging by the length of his leg."

Roger was peering about excitedly and made his own discovery.

"See, there's another knee mark in the snow. No, by heaven, what is it? There's a finger! Great guns, it's a hand, a hand

with only one finger. See the stubs of the others."

The sheriff verified his discovery. A close scrutiny showed the unmistakable print of a hand on which all of the fingers were missing with the exception of the index, which had apparently lain heavily upon the powdered snow.

"You're right," said the sheriff. "That's a right hand and the trigger finger. He took his mitt off to pull the trigger an' then overbalanced."

"Do you know anybody with a hand like that round here?" asked Roger

The sheriff shook his head. "If there was anyone maimed like that in the country I couldn't help but know him. He's a stranger all right."

The formless prints of the moccasins led back from the lake for some distance and were easily followed in the unbroken snow. Very soon, however, they merged into a deer run and in the trampling of many hoofs became indiscernible so that it was impossible to follow progress further. The perpetrator might have gone into the woods, which was unlikely, or returned in a roundabout way to some craft hidden along the shore. Reasoning in this manner, the sheriff led the way along the edge of the lake. In less than fifteen minutes they reached a narrow inlet through the alders where the naturally rough surface of the ground was flattened with what, to the experienced, could only have been the running up of a canoe. There was even the dent which corresponded to the snub prow of the craft.

But the sheriff had noticed something else, and with an exclamation pointed again. "See there," and it was impossible to mistake the same imprint of the mutilated hand in the soft mud.

"He rested that hand there when he shoved off the canoe. He waited until you beat it back to the lodge," he added, "and then went across the lake. If he went right away he got a pretty good start. Strangers are pretty seldom up here, though, and people notice everybody, so we ought to get some word of him."

A THOROUGH and systematic search was prosecuted in the ensuing days. The news of the murder traveled widely through the countryside and roused the inhabitants from the primitive tranquility in which they usually existed. The resulting scouring of the woods brought no satisfaction. A few halfbreed Micmac Indians were rounded up and a white trapper or two encountered, but all were able to satisfactorily explain their movements. Not one bore the mutilated hand for which they were looking and which constituted the sole clue to the identity of the murderer. As Roger Kennedy prepared to leave the country for his home, taking back with him the body of his friend, the sheriff was forced to acknowledge complete failure.

"Sorry, sir, I can't do no more. He's got clean outer the country, though it baffles me they ain't got any clues at railroad points. They certainly would have nabbed any stranger there that couldn't account for his movements. He certainly don't belong here. Looks like he come into the country for the crime an' got out again. Seems like he had it all figured out he could make a getaway from this spot, you losin' a day comin' back to the lodge, but why he wasn't noticed beats me.

"He's a woodsman or bin one. The way he navigated those woods an' hid his tracks shows that. Only a man with lots of experience would take a canoe over that lake alone. Maybe he's bin outer the woods a bit or just gettin' old, for he had to take three shots at his target. He did get him though, which is darned good shootin' at that distance. He's not a very big feller, but the only dogarn thing we really know about him is that hand. That's unmistakable."

Roger Kennedy went out of the Nova Scotia woods a sad and bitter man. It was tragic enough to have lost his friend under such gruesome circumstances, but he would have extracted some measure of relief could he have entertained the slightest hope of his death being avenged. He understood, however, how unlikely it was that anything would ever come to light to shed light upon the crime, how remote the possibility became with each succeeding day. By the time he had reached Cleveland, with the wilderness another world behind him, he was resigned to adding this to the continent's long list of unsolved crimes, and in baffled despair entirely gave up all effort to explain the mystery of his friend's death.

The mystery of his friend's violent death

and any possibility of its solution came to be entirely driven from his mind by other matters when Roger Kennedy came to settle the estate. He was puzzled and bewildered. Burton Symes, who had passed as a man wealthy beyond the average, seemed to be possessed of next to nothing in the way of material resources. He could obtain no enlightenment on the question until he went to see Symes' banker, who made it clear.

"Sure, I can tell you where most of his money is, though as far as I am concerned, it remains as much of a mystery as ever. Years ago Burton Symes came to me and opened an account under the curious name of Rosebud Quintet. He offered no explanation whatever and it was no business of mine to ask. It was a pretty substantial sum which has been accumulating at compound interest, in addition to which he made frequent augmentary deposits. Altogether it amounts now to something over half a million dollars. I can only pay it now to persons who can satisfactorily prove to me that they are the cryptic Rosebud Quintet or surviving members."

"You haven't any idea who they are?"

"Not the remotest. The only thing I do know, from something Symes let slip one day, and which may possibly have some bearing on the case, is that some of Symes' early years were spent in the Yukon."

THIS was news to Kennedy. It made him realize how little he really did know about his friend and his life beyond superficial externals. Years before, almost mysteriously it seemed to him looking back now, Symes had appeared in Cleveland apparently already a rich man. Further success had come to him and the succeeding years had but added to his wealth and increased his prosperity. Yet it had never been possible to term him a happy man. A film of gloom seemed to enshroud him in even his gayest moments and to this Kennedy had become so accustomed as never to speculate on possible explanations. He remembered now long periods given up to morose brooding without apparent reason. Was there something hidden in his friend's past life which had robbed him of his subsequent peace of mind? What was the mysterious Rosebud Quintet?

The mystery of the huge bank deposit and the obscure quintet in whose name it stood intrigued him the more as he endeavored to analyze the situation. The more deeply he pondered the firmer he became convinced that it was his duty to his dead friend to endeavor to accomplish what he had evidently purposed and intended, namely, to link up the two. This sense of duty, combined with a naturally irritating curiosity over the whole affair, brought about a decision on his part to let all other matters go and devote his entire attention and energies to this. He would take the banker's tip, go to the Yukon and see what he could discover there.

SOME weeks later found him in Dawson City. The initial success of his quest came to him with a rapidity which astonished as it gratified him. The first night there he was sitting in the hotel lobby and engaged in conversation with a gray and grizzled man in the next chair whom he discovered, after desultorily chatting awhile, to be a Yukon oldtimer. With a little hesitation and a trifle of embarrassment, Roger hazarded his inquiry.

"The Rosebud Quintet! Well, I should say so. It's sure an indication you don't belong to the Yukon to be asking a question like that. Brings back the wild old days to hear that name again.

"The Rosebud Discovery was one of the most sensational strikes of '98. There were five young fellows met in the inside after the rush and they pooled their claims. After the strike, which was a rich one, they became known everywhere as the Rosebud Quintet. They certainly cleaned up a nice little poke that winter and were sure of a good comfortable stake all round.

"One of the partners was Jim Wright. The strike was really made on his claim though, as they had syndicated their holdings, of course it belonged to him no more than to the rest of them. Anyhow that might have stuck in his mind and then you've got to allow for most unnatural kinks in men's minds in those reckless days when you consider what happened. The five of them decided it was safer to have the dust in Dawson City before spring, and it was settled that Jim Wright should go out with the only team of dogs they had, accompanied by Bud Hasard who was showing signs of scurvy and needed attention.

Bud Hasard weakened badly on the way out and had to be left at another miner's shanty. Jim Wright made the rest of the way with the dust alone. The snows were just going when he arrived there. What happened after that nobody knows, but after the first boat had gone down he had disappeared with the dust. No one ever heard of him again."

"And the other four fellows?"

"You can imagine what they felt like when he didn't return. Their claims were played out. It was only a sensational pocket like most of the Yukon gold, and they had taken every ounce out of it. The whole Klondike petered out that spring and there was nothing for them to do. Guess they hadn't much heart anyway. They all drifted away in the big exodus out of the country and I guess no one's ever heard of them since.

"Can you recollect their names?"

"Let's see. Jim Travers, Swede Olsen"—the old man wrinkled his brow in an effort—"Red Harrison, and—and, of course, Bud Hasard."

Roger Kennedy retired that night in a certain satisfaction of mind. He felt that he had at least made an auspicious start towards carrying out what had evidently been his friend's intent. It had its distressing side, too, the way he had settled things. He had not much doubt but that Jim Wright was his friend Burton Symes, that this had been the matter preying upon his mind throughout the years, and that for so long he had been trying to right as far as possible the wrong he had done, perhaps on momentary impulse. The difficulties in the way of finding these men after the lapse of so many years seemed insurmountable, but he felt it doubly his duty to do his utmost. His obligation to his dead friend called for the righting of the crime he had committed: that to the four men, perhaps still impoverished wanderers, that he should link them up with the money standing to their credit.

He speedily discovered that though the four partners had left the Yukon together, they had soon separated. This was going to multiply the difficulties of his task fourfold, but resolutely he determined to tackle the problem systematically, to take one at a time, and endeavor to trace them individually.

THE search for Jim Travers occupied him two years. It took him all down the Pacific coast from Skagway to Vera Cruz. With difficulty he secured trace of him in one place to lose it for weeks and sometimes months altogether in another. He went from harbor wharf to fruit farm and from sheep ranch to sawmill. Relentlessly, undiscouraged he kept on the trail, permitting nothing to swerve him from his purpose, and suddenly, without warning, he reached the end. Jim Travers had come to the end of a wandering poverty-stricken life when, in the Oregon lumber woods, a falling pine had instantaneously snuffed out his life.

Back to the Yukon to start again after two years. This time he set out to hunt down Swede Olsen. He found it more difficult to get trace of him, and it was months before he ascertained that he had come to Vancouver from the Yukon. More weeks went by before he discovered that he had gone straight across the continent from there to Nova Scotia. Thereafter he slowly picked up clues from port to port and city to city down the entire Atlantic coast to Florida. He had been cod fishing with the Nova Scotia fleet; stevedoring in New York and Boston; farm laboring in various parts of New England; beachcombing in Florida. His line of Fate terminated as abruptly and tragically: A little grave along the New Jersey coast marked the spot where coastguards had buried him when swept in by the ocean which had overturned his boat.

Nearly three years Roger Kennedy had spent in determining this and he returned to the Yukon indefatigably and unflaggingly to start out again. It was even more difficult to get trace of Red Harrison who he found only after long discouraging efforts, had headed for the interior of the United States. Thereafter his progress had been from city to city, the menial labor he had uniformly undertaken being the most eloquent indication of his condition and weakening physique. Kennedy laboriously dogged him in Chicago, St. Paul, St. Louis, Detroit, and a score of other cities. Wracked by disease, his wanderings had terminated much earlier than those of his two partners. Less than five years after leaving the Yukon, according to brief official record, he had succumbed in a Minne-

apolis hospital after an illness of months.

When Roger Kennedy left the hospital he had been seven years on his quest. There was now no doubt but that one man alone remained to be accounted for. When he found him, living or dead, his long task would have been accomplished. Feverishly he set out anew in the satisfying knowledge that he was nearing the end, hoping that at least one man would be left to whom his friend might make some sort of posthumous restitution, who might benefit from the fortune waiting and piling up in the Cleveland bank.

THE first trace of Bud Hasard was in the British Columbia mining district; the next a Montana wheat field. At various times he was on the Alberta range, on a threshing rig in Minnesota, on railroad construction in Manitoba, been with a lumber gang in Michigan, with a train crew in Eastern Canada, and in a maritime pulp and paper mill. The search took him laterally across the continent, back and forth. From week to week, from month to month, the search dragged on, but Roger was encouraged by the knowledge that he was closing upon the man he was trying to benefit.

At length the pursuit led him up across the Montana border into the range country of Southern Alberta. He put up at a ranch house one night and set out early next morning upon the trail in a buggy. From a cowboy he encountered he learned that a man of the description he was following had arrived in a very sick condition at the Circle 4 ranch the night before and had been given shelter.

"He's sure a wreck if there ever was one," said the rider, preparing to go on his way. "Ain't bin doin' anythin', has he? Don't hardly look capable."

"Oh, no," said Kennedy. "On the contrary, I have good news for him."

"Well, you better get there pronto if you want to deliver it."

Despite the cowboy's foreboding, Kennedy arrived at the Circle 4 ranch fully expecting to find that Bud Hasard had moved on and eluded him again. But the ranch foreman nonchalantly assured him that the man he sought was in the bunkhouse. Thrilling at this turn of events, Roger moved off with him.

"He won't never leave there though," added the foreman. "He's all in an' due to peg out any time. I'll go in an' see."

He returned in a few minutes.

"Better come quickly if you want to see him alive. You just got time. He's in his last spasm, I guess."

Roger followed to the bunkhouse and entered after him.

Upon one of the bunks lay the gaunt and emaciated form of an old man, the blanket coming close up to the neck revealing rather than hiding the tenuity of the wasted body. The thin face, tanned and furrowed by years in the open, was flushed with fever. Roger, taking this in on entry, thought him dead until his eyes opened and rested upon him, when the old man tried to raise himself up but fell back weakly. He was trying to speak and Roger moved over and inclined his head. But he was too weak. All he could he could catch were a few disjointed phrases—"the last"—"Rosebud"—"satisfied."

As he bent lower the head fell back, a tremor passed over the frail body, and then there was no further movement. The foreman moved over to the bunk and thrusting his hand beneath the blanket felt the heart. He looked up and shook his head at Kennedy, standing there profoundly moved and suffering all the pangs of the loss of a victory he had seen within his grasp.

He turned to move away, then looked 'round as the foreman pulled down the blanket preparatory to covering up the dead man's face. As he did so Kennedy started forward and arrested his arm. The foreman followed the direction of his eyes. He was gazing in mingled fascination and horror at the right hand of the dead man, upon which all the fingers but the index were missing.

Roger Kennedy was still in a state of utter stupefaction and bewilderment when the corporal of the mounted police who had been summoned from town by the foreman arrived at the ranch. That evening he told him the whole story and the policeman made copious notes. Thoroughly sick of the entire affair, exhausted and dispirited, the very thought of having to revisit the section of Nova Scotia which had been the scene of the crime was repugnant

to him, and he was relieved at the constable's assurance that it would not be necessary to go. The corporal himself undertook to leave for the Maritime province the next day and arranged to meet Kennedy in Montreal, where he would apprise him of his arrival by wire.

A LITTLE more than two weeks later Kennedy met the khaki-clad figure at Windsor Station and a few minutes later was seated opposite him in a hotel lobby.

"Your old friend the sheriff is dead," were the corporal's first words, "but they still talk and speculate about the crime back there. With all the matter you gave me it was an easy matter to explain everything, though if you had not been following him up, for a totally different reason, he would certainly never have been found or anyone suspected who killed Burton Symes. It is one of those exceedingly simple explanations which from their very simplicity seem to escape the most thorough investigation. After discovering where Bud Hasard was working at the time you went up hunting it was pretty easy to reconstruct the whole affair. I have it figured out like this, and I don't think there are many flaws in it.

"When Burton Symes, or Jim Wright as he was then, beat it with the gold belonging to the syndicate, the other four swore to get him and make him pay. It is easy to believe that, and what convinces me they set out with that intent is the systematic manner in which they prosecuted their search. One took the Pacific coast, one the Atlantic coast, the third interior of the United States, and the fourth the northern states and Canada. They gave their lives up to that task, and three of them died without having attained any success.

"Bud Hasard, however, changing from job to job in his search, came to be for a while trainman on the Dominion Atlantic Railway in Nova Scotia. That was what he was doing when you and Symes went up there to hunt. He recognized Symes. All that, of course, was easy to assume. I got stuck there until I began looking through the railway's records for that period. Then I came across an interesting item which cleared up the whole business. It was to the effect that one Bud Hasard, a trainman, had been mulct pay and received five demerit marks for extreme negligence in permitting himself to be left behind by his train whilst on duty. The significant point was that his negligence had occurred at the very town where you had alighted to strike into the woods, and on the day before the crime was committed.

"Do you see it all now, and how extremely easy it was to get away with it? The train had a day's run from one end of the peninsula to the other. One night in the darkness he misses it. The next night when he arrives back he is waiting for it, just as is naturally to be expected. It is a fair-sized town, an important railroad point, and certainly no one is going to take especial note of a railroad man there. The only people interested in him are the train crew and their only concern is that he joins the train again. It would never suggest itself to them that he had been left behind intentionally, or that left in a strange town where he knew no one he would do anything else but wait impatiently for their return.

"Yet, think of all that could happen in that time. It was no trouble to get out of town in the darkness, to paddle across the lake, and be in the hunting grounds in the morning. It was as easy to return unobserved in the evening and be waiting for the train as if he had been there all day. He was gone before word of the crime reached the town. The train crew, running from one end of the province to the other, if they ever heard of the crime at all, would never think of connecting it with an accidental day's absence from the train, and they were the only ones who knew of his presence anywhere near the woods that day. It was all so exceedingly simple, yet quite abstruse. Perhaps a mere chance, perhaps a carefully calculated scheme."

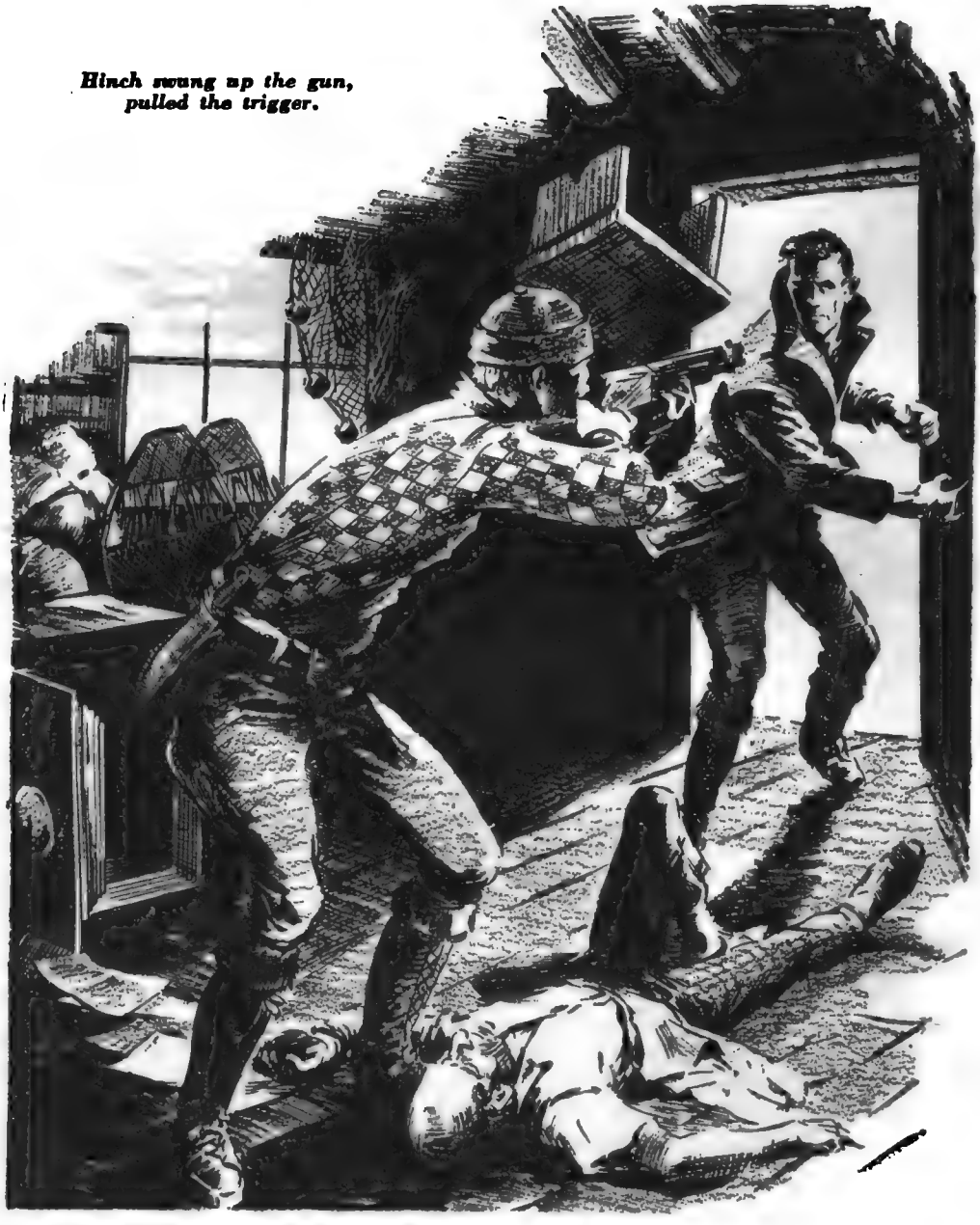
"So that is the end," sighed Roger Kennedy at length. "Wasted lives, wasted money, wasted years. Certainly that was unlucky gold. What on earth am I going to do with it now?"

"There's sure been a hoodoo about it. Change it's luck and set it to good work. Make it a really useful monument to the memory of the unfortunate Rosebud Quintet."

RENEGADE OF EAGLE COVE

By DEX VOLNEY

Hinch had planned the perfect robbery. He couldn't lose—for the only men between him and the money were an unconscious cook—and a simple-minded man with an unloaded gun.



Hinch swung up the gun, pulled the trigger.

THE gimlet eyes of Hinch, the thief, glittered with excitement and greed. He stood transfixed, peering through a large crack in the wall of the salt shed which the boss of this isolated Alaskan cod-fishing station had set him to white-washing.

At Hinch's back were rows of brine

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tanks full of salt cod. Through the crack in the wall he had a partial view of a cluster of weather-blackened buildings, half buried in snowdrifts, that were huddled about the inner end of a spindly steel-legged wharf. Behind the codfishing station loomed the snow-clad spine of the mountainous island, seeming almost to pierce the cold gray of the Alaskan sky.

Over a cross-island trail, below that white ridge, a man had just come from Squall Harbor on the farther side, bearing a fat canvas package heavily plastered with seals. It was this package that rivetted the attention of Hinch. In it, he knew, there were fourteen thousand dollars in cash.

Through the cold wintry air words came clearly to Hinch's alert ears as the newcomer handed the money to Ed Pierson, the big, beefy good-natured boss of the fishing station.

"First money we've seen in nine months," Pierson was saying. "Sure seems a lot overdue."

"Well, the steamer *North Star* passed by on the way west 'count of it bein' such bad weather," replied the messenger. "Now she's bound home again to Seattle, and lucky she managed to make the harbor between gales. The captain hated to come in at all, and he's pullin' out at five o'clock sharp. If you got any mail, it's got to be over there by then. He says he goes at five to the second."

"Let him go," snorted Pierson. "That old woman of a steamboat skipper don't know what bad harbors mean. Look at us, havin' to tow a three-masted windjammer into this rocky hole today and load her with salt fish. And that squaw in gold braid thinks it's a hardship to put off a britches-pocket full of money that my codfishermen been yellin' their heads off for all winter. Too bad about him. Sailin' at five o'clock to the minute, is he? He'd ought to be runnin' a transcontinental express train down in th' States, th' old coot. Well, let him sail—"

"Oh, all right," growled the messenger. "It's nothin' to me. I know you danged codfishers think you're so tough you can bite chunks out of rocks an' sail boats across th' mountains of Kamchatka. Let it go at that. Sign this receipt for your fourteen thousand dollars and I'll be gettin' back over th' hill."

"I'm always uneasy when this spring pay-money comes," grumbled Pierson. "Be glad when I've dished it out."

"You got a safe, ain't you?" said the sourdough impatiently. "What do you keep in it—smokin' tobacco an' fishhooks?"

"Yes, I know, I have a safe," said Pierson, dubiously. "But th' station is sure goin' to be deserted, what with all th' men out in the straits, fishin', an' me an' th' beach crew havin' to go with our powerboat to tow in th' schooner *Serena.*"

As the messenger departed, Pierson surveyed the station with a frown. Now far away stood the house in which Pierson lived. The front room he used as an office; next to that was his gear-cluttered bedroom. In the rear was the messroom where he ate with the fishermen, and adjoining was the kitchen where Greasy Bill, the rotund cook of the station, grumblingly toiled his days away.

A lonely place, Eagle Cove. No communication, save for the occasional outgoing fishing-schooner, or the cannery steamer that touched at Squall Harbor on the opposite side of the island.

THREE men were going to be left behind on the station, when Pierson went out to tow in the *Serena.*

First, there was Hinch, the shanghaied fugitive, from the salmon cannery at Morshovoi to the westward. In San Francisco, the salmon companies still recruited crews with the aid of unscrupulous agents, who drugged men and loaded them aboard vessels in the bay, for fifty dollars apiece. Also they had a system of getting prisoners out of the county jail who would agree to go to Alaska for the summer.

Pierson was familiar with the procedure; he had seen the suave runners who took victims into a hidden barroom to buy them whiskey. Stuff that seemed to explode the instant it was swallowed and knock the drinker into insensibility. Then followed the awakening aboard a salmon company ship, bound for Alaska. An old game, discontinued twenty-five years ago on the merchant ships, but still practiced on the northbound fishermen. The victims were disreputable; drug addicts, jailbirds, and

were not too greatly entitled to sympathy.

Yet Pierson was a humane man, and when Hinch, exhausted, starving, fleeing in a leaking dory, came into Eagle Cove, the codfish-station superintendent fed him and put him to work. Hinch could do carpentering and repairing about the place. Just now he was whitewashing the inside walls of the salt shed with a long-handled brush.

The second man who would be left on the station was Single-Minded, the gangling young codfish snailer who had become a fixture at Eagle Cove. Pierson, looking at him, swore again. Single-Minded stood on the wharf, resting his angular rear on an empty salmon barrel, oblivious of the icy north wind whining down the white slopes of the island, bitter with the chill of the not far distant Bering Sea. He was addressing remarks to two powerboat-men near him and was speaking in a drawl that went on and on, and seemed to convulse his hearers.

"Prob'bly," growled Pierson aloud, "he's forgot to change the brine in number seven tank, an' run the gasoline engine to charge th' lighting batteries, an' go out to th' first mooring line and caulk that leaky buoy-keg on the farther end. He won't think of none of them things till th' fish is turned down, th' batteries are dead, an' th' confounded buoy-keg goes to th' bottom, line an' all."

PIERSON could remember many times when Single-Minded had crawled shivering out of his bunk in the middle of the night, and rushed off to attend to something that had slipped his memory—the infernal fool. Pierson grinned in spite of himself. Oh, well, he was a good fellow anyway. Honest, sure, and in an emergency he was right there. There was the time the rotgut-crazed Portuguese went after Pierson with a splitting knife. And the day of the blizzard when . . .

"Single-Minded," he called.

"Orders?" inquired the delinquent one.

"You know my big hunting rifle in the kitchen. Load her and leave her lay handy. Never know when she might come in useful."

"Yes, sir."

"Do it now, while I got my eye on you, confound it!"

Single-Minded grinned and departed to obey, circling around the rear of the cookhouse toward the shed-like kitchen.

Ed Pierson turned to consider the third man who would be left behind, and was reassured. This was Greasy Bill, the round-bellied little fishing-station cook.

Greasy Bill's one shortcoming was that, on being given a roll of money, he would get into his clattering power dory and rush off across Nagai Straits to Unga, to drink himself into the sawdust. Then after three or four days he would return crestfallen and broke, to go back to wrestling pots and pans. However, his ability as a fishing-station cook was indisputable. He was credulous and flighty-tempered, but after all he was probably as trustworthy as any man cursed by the unnatural bondage of a cook-shack stove.

"Oh, hell," said Ed Pierson. "There ain't no reason I should be worryin' about that money."

He marched into the superintendent's house through the front door. Into the safe in the office he tossed the canvas-covered package with its cheerful looking contents. He closed the rusty little safe carefully, listened for the click, then whirled the dial. He stepped outside.

Squat little Greasy Bill stood in shirt sleeves in the side door of the kitchen.

"I see yuh got it, huh," he said. "Supper's cooked an'—"

"Sure," said Pierson. "But you have to wait till morning. You got to stand by until I tow th' *Serena* in for loadin'—" There was a finality to his words.

"But I already have tongues and sounds stewed. I got potatoes boiled. I got frog's-eye puddin' ready. Why'n hell—"

"Every one of you has got to stay here on th' job today," said Pierson, relentlessly. "So go drink some tea or somethin' to keep from dryin' up like a thistledown till tomorrow, Greasy. You ain't gettin' off this station until I ladle out that cash, which you'll pack acrost to Unga an' sling over Soapy Komeda's bar like a drunken fool."

"But th' money's here. We're s'posed to get it right away. We was s'posed to get it long ago—" Greasy Bill's black greasy-whiskered face sagged.

"Aw, shut up, will you?" growled Pierson. "And listen to what I'm tellin' you.

I don't care if you got roast squab an' custard pie ready. If you get your money you're gone like a looney seagull. An' Single-Minded will forget his own name in his hurry to follow you across to Unga an' sit behind a pile of red, white an' blue chips until one tinhorn or another has cleaned him to slick dimes. Well, I ain't goin' to stand for it—not today."

"I got a date in Unga," began Greasy Bill, but at that moment Single-Minded came running.

"Th' *Serena!*" he yelled. "She's right out here off th' Pinnacle Rocks an' th' tide's settin' her on fast. She's got signals up. She wants you quick. You better get started, boss!"

Pierson cursed and ran for the wharf hastily. He leaped aboard his power boat and in a few minutes that sturdy craft was chugging rapidly out of the cove. The entrance of Eagle Harbor, laced with reefs, girt with ledges, was perilous for the schooners of the codfishing company, and it was urgent that he be out there with a tow-line before the *Serena* got into serious trouble with the rocks and the boiling tide.

"That was a right good run for a man as fat as old Ed Pierson," said Single-Minded critically, coming up to the kitchen door and grinning at Greasy Bill.

"Hope he busts a blood vessel and melts into a pile o' slush," snarled Greasy Bill, vindictively. "Here I was figgerin' on gettin' over to Unga. This is th' thirteenth o' March an' my last chance tuh—but why tell you about it? You wouldn't understand nohow, you loon. Dash black th' ding-donged rotten luck!"

As the station power boat headed out of Eagle Cove, Hinch straightened his thin back and let the whitewashing brush slide from his bony hands into the pail between his spattered shoes. Guardedly he looked about him.

His burning desire now was to get safely out to Seattle, and here was his chance. The captain of the mail steamer would be interested only in obtaining the price of the outward passage—a hundred and fifty dollars. And if he could get hold of the sack of money in Pierson's safe, there was no reason why he could not make good his escape with it. There was no wireless telegraph station to spread the alarm within two hundred miles. There was no craft in the region that could overhaul the mail steamer. He would surely gain his destination and vanish.

Concerning the rusty safe in Pierson's room, Hinch felt contempt for it. He knew far more about that safe than did its present owner. He had noted its size, shape and make—its very considerable age. A mere tin cracker-box. Among the dark and devious passages of Hinch's experienced mind was a groove set apart for such knowledge.

BETWEEN the canvas-bound package full of money and the eager Hinch there stood not only the safe itself, with the combination as yet unknown to him, but the two men, Greasy Bill, the cook, and Single-Minded, the "beach director" of the Alaska Codfish Company, jestingly thus styled by the codfish-snailers. Pierson and his crew would not be in until dark, at the soonest.

These obstacles must all be passed within three hours. Hinch must have the package of money, and be on his way to Squall Harbor, by four.

Greasy Bill had brought his own dilapidated power dory up to the fishbox from the mooring line, in anticipation of his trip across the straits to Unga, eight miles away on another island. Now, as Hinch covertly watched, Greasy Bill waddled disconsolately out on the ice-covered wharf, got a punt alongside his dory and took the craft out on the buoyed line moored well off the beach. Then he sculled back in the punt and came puffing up toward the house, which stood hardly fifty feet from the inner end of the little pier.

Hinch approached.

"Wanted to go over to town, didn't you, Greasy Bill?" he inquired sympathetically.

"Yeah," growled the rotund cook, casting an unfriendly glare in Hinch's direction. "It's pay-day. This ain't no way to do. Let th' *Serena* wait. Confounded stinkin' old hooker'd better be on th' rocks anyhow. She was under water once fer ten years, an' it was a dirty trick to raise her ag'in, so's poor iggerunt sailors would have to go to sea in her. Then they send her to Alaska in th' middle of th' winter. Hell of a' outfit, these codfish people. No souls in none of 'em."

"Sorry bunch, all right," pursued Hinch, cautiously, with assumed sincerity.

"Sure they are—cheap, anyhow. Tight as clams. Holdin' onto a man's pay to th' last minnit, like that. Here I got supper grub cooked up an' all."

"It's a shame," said Hinch. "They ought to be taught a lesson, so they'd respect a man when they see one."

"Aw, hell, I ain't nothin' but a drunken cook, I guess," said Greasy Bill, bitterly. "What can I do but holler an' take it? Well, I hope a gale comes up an' blows an' blows th' old *Serena* off to hell an' gone."

He went toward the cook-house, but paused sulkily in the doorway, and turned to gaze across the straits at the white peaks of Unga Island.

Hinch swore silently and sought to study out some other procedure.

THERE was that loaded gun in the house. If he could persuade either Greasy Bill or Single-Minded to leave the station, then he believed he could risk shooting down the other. There would be no witness to see what happened, and he could make his escape.

"Why don't you go ahead over to Unga an' tell everybody how it is?" suggested Hinch. "You've been cooking on these fishing stations for years, and you ought to be able to get drunk on credit."

"No chance in the world," sighed Greasy Bill. "Soapy talks slick, but sells his likker fer cash. Besides, Pierson said for me to hang around here till he comes back. What'n hell good I am here today I don't know. Man'd think he was expectin' pirates or fire or somethin'. Worst of it is, I paid Five-Ace Sharpeneck fifty dollars on a ground patent over in Silver Bay. Figgerin' to git me a few blues an' go fur-ranchin' an' quit bein' a slave fer belly-achin' codfish snailers. An' I was s'posed to meet Sharpeneck today to pay him another ninety dollars on it. This'll give him a' excuse to lay down on th' deal, damn it."

"He wouldn't do that," suggested Hinch.

"Wouldn't he?" scowled Greasy Bill. "Hell, fellow, you don't know Five-Ace Sharpeneck. He steams postage stamps off'n letters so he won't have to buy new, an' threatened to shoot th' postmaster if he wouldn't take 'em like that. He's ornery."

"That is tough," said Hinch. He thought swiftly to himself that he was at last on the right track. He would soon play Greasy Bill into his hand. But he had to hurry. He could feel the minutes slipping away.

"You think Sharpeneck will do you out of the money you've paid him, if you don't show up today?" he egged the cook on.

"Sure he will," said Greasy Bill. "I was gonna explain it to Ed, but that durned Single-Minded come yellin' about th' *Serena* bein' out there, an' he rushed off before I had time."

"Well," said Hinch, "if Ed Pierson would understand, maybe you and I could find a way. If you was to take out ninety dollars of your pay from the money he's got in the safe, why—it's comin' to you, ain't it? We could put th' rest back and it would be all right. You get enough of what's coming to you to go make Five-Ace Sharpeneck look small."

Greasy Bill stared at Hinch.

"Out of th' safe?"

"Sure, just part of your salary. Only ninety dollars. Put all the rest back."

A SARCASTIC smile wreathed Greasy Bill's lips. He reared back and held his hands on his bulging little paunch.

"Oh, yes, that's a fine idea," he retorted. "I s'pose yuh think a safe is just a coffee can or somethin' that you can pry th' lid off with your fingernails! Thassall you know about what safes is for, huh?"

"I," said Hinch cheerfully, "will open that safe." His gimlet eyes glistened in his bony face. Then he laughed softly. "You wouldn't savvy, cookie, old boy, but that's my racket. Guess you never heard of Piano-Fingers Hinch. No, I hope not. But the dirty Barbary Coast snake that fed me white lightnin' and slipped me aboard a stinking salmon packer will hear of me when I get clear of this layout. Oh, yes. Anyways, I'm Piano-Fingers Hinch."

"Pianer - Fingers — yuh mean — say, what'n heck do yuh mean?"

"I mean," said Hinch, diplomatically, "that I got real tender feelers. So tender I can maybe wind open that old tin can of Ed Pierson's. I ain't sure, but I'm willin'

to try, if it'll help you any to get ninety dollars so you can go save that patented ground."

"Good gosh," said Greasy Bill, rubbing his little paunch, and staring at the other. "Well — by jingo, I am entitled to my pay. I'll go call Single-Minded to give a hand."

"No — not him!" gasped Hinch so sharply that Greasy Bill jumped. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. We got to get that simpleton clear away from here. We must think of something that will take him away."

Bewilderment, also a faint spark of suspicion, showed on the oily face of Greasy Bill.

Hinch doused the spark quickly.

"He'll want his pay, too. If he knows that you're getting your money, he'll want the same. Then he'll rush off to Unga, too, and gamble it; and there won't be anybody left here but me. And when Pierson comes in with the *Serena,* he'll jump all over me for what I did. Now, there's no reason why that sap, Single-Minded, can't wait till tomorrow. He's got nothing on his mind but poker chips. He has no real estate business hanging on the hook, the way you have. Why, look at me," continued Hinch, nobly. "I'm not worrying over my pay, am I? Yours is a special case. It's highly important. We'll take your ninety dollars out of the safe and put the rest back and lock it up. That's all there is to it. Why," Piano-Fingers finished with a burst of wide-eyed candor, "you can stand by and be sure it's all done proper."

GREASY BILL thought it over.

"All right," he said, with mingled fear and eagerness. "I sure have got 'portant business in Unga. An' my throat's kinda sore. Cold or somethin' on my chest. Needs medicatin'. Well, if we got to keep that fool Single-Minded from knowin' that we're goin' to get me my ninety dollars, maybe I can send him to kenchin' fish in th' salt shed."

"That's not far enough away," said Hinch promptly. "He might leave the job and come in on top of me. I wouldn't like that."

Greasy Bill scowled at his shapeless, black rubber boots and thought. Again he gazed out over the snow-covered helterskelter disorder of the fishing station at the heaving surface of the granite-bound cove.

"The tide's runnin' out now," he remarked. "We might cut adrift a dory an' tell Single-Minded he didn't tie it good. Th' current will carry it right out of th' cove. Then I could send Single-Minded in the punt to row after it."

Hinch also turned and gazed down toward the bowl-shaped cove where the rusty steel legs of the wharf stood beyond the boiling surf.

"That ain't so good," he said doubtfully. "The dory may not drift very far."

"No?" retorted Greasy Bill. "If you don't think so, you just go cut one loose with th' tide on th' ebb, an' see. Last fall, on pay-day th' damn snailers done that to me. Cut my dory loose an' told me to go ketch it. I got in th' tender an' started to rowin'. Couldn't make no headway, though I rowed fit to bust. Finally I seen I was draggin' a cod-line tied under th' punt. On th' other end was a cussed gunny-sack fulla rocks. But even when I cleared that, it took me an hour an' a half to git my dory. If I had time I'd like to play that trick on Single-Minded. It'd make you split to watch."

"Yeah," said Hinch, grimly. "Well, you know more about that tide than I do. Go ahead."

SINGLE-MINDED was in the fishermen's bunkhouse, sprawling luxuriously in a chair before the sheetiron. Greasy Bill cut loose the dory, then returning to the bunkhouse he stamped in and glowered at the youth.

"Hey, you loafer," he called. "There's a dory adrift. Tide's carryin' it out. Go head it off—an' do it quick, too."

"Confound them dories breakin' loose," grumbled Single-Minded, making no move to rise. "Mebbe Ed'll see it when he comes in with th' *Serena.* Ain't often a fellow gets a chance to sit down an' do nothin' in th' day-time, not in this slave-drivin' hole."

"Yeah, an' Ed'll fix you good, if he does see that dory," yelped Greasy Bill. "Yuh think he's goin' to cast loose a five-hundred-ton codfish schooner to go chasin'

a blue bug-eye around th' blasted rocks?"

"Go get it yourself, then," sighed Single-Minded. "Me, I'm gonna rest. I know what's comin' when that schooner is moored. Hump salt cod for a week."

"I can't go," protested Greasy Bill. "I got to fix supper."

"What's for supper?"

"Tongues an sounds," said Greasy Bill, and then he added hastily, "and hot biscuits. Of course—" he spread his lower lip, dubbed his pudgy hands on his paunch and shrugged his shoulders indifferently —"if you don't want that, I can dish up some of th' reg'lar hard-tacks, which is all Friday night rates on this station. . . ."

Single-Minded was already on his feet.

"Potato-masher," he declared, "remain here. I would go out and tow in the *Serena* with a pair of oars for some of them hot biscuits you can make."

He went out of the door of the bunkhouse and headed toward the wharf. Hinch watched the gangling youth doubtfully. He glanced at the dory bobbing out in the cove, already a quarter of a mile away. He was not yet satisfied with the ruse. Single-Minded was a good man on the water. He might get that dory back to the mooring line in no time. Therefore the crook resolved to give Single-Minded something more to do that would keep him away from the beach for at least an hour. So he, too, stepped down toward the inner end of the little station wharf, hardly a dozen yards away.

"Say, Single-Minded," he said, in a confidential voice, "to get that dory, you got to row right past the end of the outside mooring line, don't you?"

"Sure," said Single-Minded. "What's botherin' you?"

"Well," said Hinch reticently, "I was overhearing the station boss a few minutes before he jumped in that power boat and went out to meet the schooner. He was swearing to himself that you'd probably forget to fix that leaking buoy on the dory line. 'If he does,' he said, 'I'll kick him off the station, the loafer.'"

"Oh, he did?" said Single-Minded, coldly.

"So," went on Hinch, "I thought if you was to get a bucket of tar out of the paint shed and some caulking gear, while you were out there you might fix the mooring-line buoy. It'd save you the trouble of making another trip. I just thought I'd mention it."

"Oh, yes," said Single-Minded. "This concern for my welfare is sure accommodatin' of you, brother."

The sarcasm was not lost upon Hinch. He lowered his eyes to hide an answering gleam of malice. A sudden cunning inspiration seized him, tickled his fancy.

"And I thought, maybe, if you was going to the tool shed, you'd oblige by bringin' me back a piece of fine emery cloth." His eyes were still downcast, his voice endeavoring to be friendly. "It's slippery today on the planks around here and I ain't able to walk very good in my slick-soled shoes."

Single-Minded was disarmed.

"Why sure, guy, I'll bring it. Why didn't you say so? What you going to do with emery cloth?"

"Just a little job of polishin'," said Hinch, enjoying himself. "I'm going to surprise the station boss with it when he comes back."

"You sure are a son-of-a-gun for toil," said Single-Minded. "Doin' extra jobs with Pierson away an' all. Stars in your crown, brother. Stars in your crown!"

He stalked up the slippery walk to the tool shed, brought the emery paper back to Hinch and went on down to the shingle to put off in the punt. As Hinch watched Single-Minded start out, toward the now distant dory, he heard the ship's clock in the kitchen strike five bells.

"Two-thirty—now is the time," said Hinch, softly.

"Sure," said Greasy Bill, overhearing him. "I'll give yuh a hand, huh?"

GREASY BILL'S part in the proceedings, however, proved to be slight. In fact it dwindled to a no more important role than looking on while Mr. Hinch struggled with the safe.

The thief's first move was to abrase his already thin-skinned fingertips. Next he touched the rusted dial with a delicate hand, and pressed his body as close as possible against the safe door. His ear was flattened upon the metal.

Greasy Bill waited in rising excitement. With the faintest perceptible pressure, the

least perceptible movement, Hinch slid the dial around. Nothing happened. He slid it farther, delicately forward, delicately back, his ear acutely sensitive to the first shifting of the weights.

The ship's clock in the kitchen struck six bells—three o'clock. Beads of sweat were starting from Hinch's bony forehead. His fingers and hands were damp.

By now Greasy Bill's attention began to wander.

"Tomorrow morning Ed'll sure be s'prised," he remarked. "Fact is, he may even git kinda sore 'bout this. Still an' all, m' pay's m' pay—"

"Shut up, damned fool!" shrieked Hinch, nerves shattered. "Shut up!"

Greasy Bill gaped at him. The little sparks of suspicion kindled again. Why should this drifter be so crazy to do a mere cod-fish-station cook a favor?

At that moment, without a creak, without a whisper, the door of the safe swung wide.

Greasy Bill stared at it, pop-eyed.

"Jimminy—so easy as all that?" he gasped. "Hell, me, I ain't never gonna put none of *my* money in no safe—"

"Easy, your eye!" snarled Hinch. "Takes real fingers to do that, sourdough. Fine fingers, fine ears."

His voice and his hands trembled eagerly. He clutched the package.

"Now, th' ninety dollars," said Greasy Bill, sharp uneasiness suddenly gripping him. "Then we put th' rest back, huh?"

"It's quite heavy," said Hinch. "Lot of silver in it. I can't hardly lift it—yes, sure, your ninety dollars."

He broke the seals of the package, lifted the mouth of the canvas sack and adroitly managed to drop a paper-bound roll of silver dollars onto the floor. The package burst and the dollars scattered noisily. With a gasp of dismay, Greasy Bill bent down, clutching at them wildly.

Hinch grinned. Straightening up, he swung the canvas sack over his shoulder and brought it cracking down on the skull of the station cook.

GREASY BILL pitched onto his face. Four or five silver dollars he had seized flew from his pudgy fingers. He rolled half over and lay still, his forehead against the lower edge of the safe, his arms flung out. He made no sound. Drops of blood began to ooze from under his thick, grizzled hair.

Hinch hastily snatched up the scattered coins and thrust them into the sack. As he did so he jumped violently at a buzzing sound. It was only the ship's clock striking seven bells. An hour and a half yet before the mail steamer would leave Squall Harbor five miles away.

Hinch replaced the money in the sack and tied the mouth. He pushed shut the door of the safe.

The fat little cook lay ominously still. The slowly welling drops of blood from his temple had ceased. Rudely, Hinch seized Greasy Bill by the shoulders, dragged him laboriously into Pierson's bedroom, and pushed him underneath the bed. An Aleut crazy-quilt hanging down concealed the form of the cook. There were a few drops of blood left behind on the floor. Hastily Hinch grabbed a towel, wet it and wiped up the red blotches.

Taking up the sack of money, he started out the kitchen door toward the trail that led over the backbone of the island.

As he did so he came face to face with Single-Minded, who was heading toward the kitchen.

"Hullo," said Hinch, holding himself in control with a supreme effort, while he quickly dropped the sack behind the door.

"Hullo," returned Single-Minded.

Hinch backed inside the kitchen. The rifle stood in the farther corner. The thief pulled a chair in front of it and sat down, pretending to examine the worn sole of one of his shoes. Maybe Single-Minded would go away again.

"You get that dory already?" he asked, wetting his lips.

Single-Minded laughed. "Say, there ain't any man got so poor a memory as I have. I rowed after that cursed dory nearly an hour and then I saw that it drifted right on top of Pierson and the *Serena,* and they had picked it up. So I started back and when I come to the mooring-line, I was going to fix the buoy, then I found out here I'd went off and left behind my tar an' caulkin' gear."

"Tar an' caulking gear," repeated Hinch, red with fury at the result of his own meddling.

"That's what," said Single-Minded,

cheerfully. "Now if you hadn't asked me to bring you that emery cloth while I was in the tool shed, why I'd of not forgot my other tools. Seems like I just can't remember more'n one thing at a time, to save me. What's that you sayin'?"

"Nothing," said Hinch savagely, examining his shoe more closely.

"Where's Greasy Bill?"

"I don't know." Hinch sat upright in dismay.

"While I'm here, I figure to ask him if he'll open a tin bucket of that canned honey he puts out, about once every twenty years, with his hot biscuits."

Single-Minded looked around and then he swore. "By jingo, I don't see no sign of that little son of a walrus, or no biscuit dough neither. How come?"

Hinch's hand moved toward the rifle. Should he shoot now? But even if Single-Minded should look into Pierson's bedroom for the cook, a cursory glance would reveal nothing wrong. While Hinch hesitated, the gangling one moved away.

Hinch heard him walking through the house, yelling vainly. The thief sat quivering. He looked at the clock. The minute hand was racing. Nearly four. And the steamer *North Star* sailed at five to the second. He should be starting now.

"He ain't nowhere," said Single-Minded, returning, "unless he's crawled into a barrel of flour an' pulled it in after him for a good sleep. That'd be like him to go chasin' me out, an' then turnin' in some place himself. Well, I'll get my gear an' go out to fix that buoy."

"All right," said Hinch, rising in relief. "Meanwhile I'll hunt up Greasy Bill and give him a push toward them biscuits."

"You do that thing," urged Single-Minded. "And tell him break out th' honey. Stomach—" he rubbed his thin middle—"set up an' commence anticipatin'. Good news, friend, good news!"

"Soon fallin' dark," croaked Hinch, feverishly.

"I'm on my way," replied Single-Minded. "I'm—what th' hell!"

A groan sounded distinctly through the house. Then followed the scrambling sound of a man getting onto his feet with difficulty. Floor boards creaked. Next instant Greasy Bill appeared in the kitchen doorway, weaving drunkenly.

"Cripes!" gasped Hinch in horror.

"Th' old fool's drunk on sourdough, I bet," began Single-Minded, then the words stopped short. The face Greasy Bill turned toward him was not that of a drunken man. Lurching, moaning, the little cook advanced, then fell flat on his face on the kitchen floor.

"What's got into him?" muttered Single-Minded. "What's all this—blood on his head an' all!"

HE turned swiftly, his eyes glaring at Hinch.

"You sneakin' coyote. What's th' answer? I know—the money in the safe! Here, keep away from that rifle!"

But Hinch already had the rifle in his hands—was sighting.

"Back out of that door," he snarled. "Back out. Stop one second and you'll get this in your gizzard—or your jaw, whichever I decide on. This is my racket, you sap. Understand? You're out of it."

Single-Minded was covered. Hinch's practiced hand kept the sights trained on the other's stomach. The muzzle of the rifle looked as large as the open end of a salmon barrel to Single-Minded. He began to back.

"Faster," said Hinch. "There's a boat I got to catch and I'm goin' to lock you up—"

Single-Minded's retreating foot struck the outflung arm of Greasy Bill. He paused, blocking the door.

"Go on," shouted Hinch. "Get on there. You're stoppin' me. No, you won't go? All right, suits me—"

Single-Minded stood fast in the doorway.

With the sights now fairly between the eyes of Single-Minded—who could not resist a gasp—Hinch pulled the trigger. Four sounds came almost simultaneously—a sharp click from the rifle, a curse from Hinch, another click, and then a laugh from Single-Minded.

The gun was empty—quite harmless.

"I win," Single-Minded yelled.

He grabbed a short bench and flung it. It caught the stock of the empty gun which the thief was about to raise as a bludgeon, and smashed it out of his thin-fingered grasp.

Hinch reached backward, blindly, clutching for any weapon. He seized a flatiron

that Greasy Bill kept on the stove. Single-Minded ducked the hurtling missile, and as he did so he snatched up the fallen rifle. Hinch seized a poker and struck at Single-Minded, cracking him across the side of the knees. Single-Minded groaned but managed to keep his feet. Picking up a chair with which to shield himself, he edged toward a shelf.

A stove lid came sailing through the air and shattered the protecting chair. Single-Minded dropped the broken chair-back. Like lightning, his free hand darted to a tin box on the shelf. Hinch saw that he had picked up a cartridge.

Desperately the crook gathered himself together and leaped for the gun in Single-Minded's hands, as the gangling one slipped a cartridge into the breech and levered the block. There was a flash and the whole kitchen shook with the blast of gun-fire.

SINGLE-MINDED leaned very limply against the wall.

"Jingo," he breathed. He drew his hand across his eyes. "Gosh, how my leg hurts."

Hinch, the thief, lay sprawled on the kitchen floor, unquestionably dead.

With an effort, Single-Minded limped toward a corner to the sink. He ran some ice-cold water into a bucket, turned on his one good leg, and sent a chilly flood swashing over Greasy Bill. With a gasping groan the little rotund cook shivered, and then sat up on the floor. Curses streamed from his lips, as he glared out of one eye at Single-Minded.

"I'll—k-k-kill you—y-you know I hate water," groaned Greasy Bill. "You hit me with the bucket an' all—er—where am I? What—"

"You're just a little disconnected, hash-slinger," said Single-Minded, patiently, sinking to a chair to ease his injured leg. "This drifter here must of clouted you one."

"I remember now," moaned Greasy Bill. "Piano-Fingers he called himself. But how come—"

"It was this way," explained Single-Minded. "Th' boss, he yelled at me to load his rifle. Well, just as I started to go do it, I seen th' *Serena* standin' off th' island—an' I run out to tell him. Now when this here trouble happens, an' Hinch is startin' to blow my head off, I remembers all of a sudden that I never did get around to loadin' that rifle. So I decided to face it out."

"Some innards," approved Greasy Bill.

"Nothin' of th' sort," said Single-Minded. "My knees could have struck out sparks th' way they knocked together, when he pulled that trigger. After all, I wasn't sure he hadn't loaded that gun himself. How did I know but maybe Pierson had left a shell or two in her? But I took a chance." He grinned. "Is my hair turned white, Greasy? If it ain't, it had ought to be."

He pulled the rubber-footed musher off his bruised leg.

"And this music-fingered slicker—you sure he's plumb dead?" persisted Greasy Bill, his credulity much shattered by the afternoon's happenings.

"He is positively no more," said Single-Minded. "After I got that gun back into my own hands I worked fast. I loaded her an' snapped th' breech an' trigger nearly together. He rammed hisself right into th' muzzle. I got a one-track mind, but it never has affected my nerves or my hands—ner my stummick, neither, Greasy. I'll take this feller out of your kitchen an' lay him in th' salt shed till th' boss comes in. Meanwhile I'm expectin' hot biscuits for supper—an'—"

"Oh, hell, yes," groaned Greasy Bill, pulling himself to his feet. "That single-track mind of yours is plumb set on hot biscuits now, even if a man has to come from th' shadder of death to make 'em fer you."

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(C[redacted]m other side)

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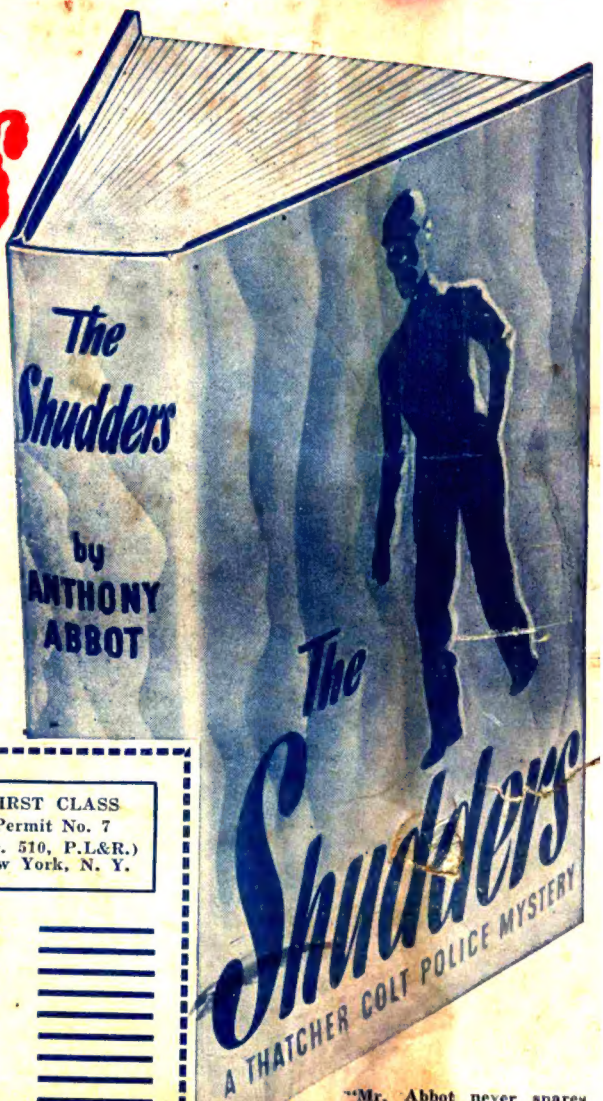

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